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# NARROWING THE GAP: EXPLORING THE CHARACTERISTICS AND PRACTICES OF URBAN SCHOOL PRINCIPALS CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Gordon D. Amerson Jr

California State University - San Bernardino, 001693002@coyote.csusb.edu

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NARROWING THE GAP: EXPLORING THE CHARACTERISTICS  
AND PRACTICES OF URBAN SCHOOL PRINCIPALS  
CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

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A Dissertation  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education  
in  
Educational Leadership

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by  
Gordon Dion Amerson Jr.  
December 2014

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December 2014

Approved by:

Dr. Louie F. Rodriguez, Committee Chair, Education

Dr. Donna Schnorr, Committee Member

Dr. Thelma Moore-Steward, Committee Member

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to critically analyze the experiences and practices of Inland Empire urban school principals as they work to close the African American achievement gap. The achievement gap begins in elementary school and continues to persist throughout elementary and secondary schools producing differences in high school graduation rates, college and career attainment, and ultimately socio-economic differences in income between various racial and ethnic groups.

We know the impact of school principals on student achievement is significant. The literature demonstrates that school principals play a key role in developing the structures and systems necessary to improve the outcomes for urban schools and more specifically African American students. Ten school principals from a large urban Inland Empire school district participated in the study and served to provide their lived experiences while leading diverse schools.

Findings indicated three emergent themes: (1) relationship builders, (2) caring environments, and (3) courageous leadership were influential in principals establishing and maintaining a school that was sensitive to the needs of African American students. Another major finding from the study demonstrated the impact that race still plays within the public school setting. Several of the study participants expressed their struggles with providing overt support of African American students.

Implications of these findings underscore the need to build principal capacity to effectively meet the needs of African American students. Additionally, the findings demonstrate the importance of building organizational sensitivity to culture and diversity in an effort to build equitable schools.

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## DEDICATION

To my beautiful and amazing wife Veronica, thank you for your commitment, support, and constant love for me. I am blessed to share my life with you. Your continual motivation has allowed me to pursue my hopes and dreams. I am forever grateful for you.

To my two beautiful children – Donovan, “my bubba”, your constant energy and encouragement helped daddy to always get his work done. Tatiana, “mi princesa” you are the joy of my life. You brighten my days and make the challenges of this world disappear with your hugs and kisses for daddy.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The achievement gap that exists between African American students and their White peers continues to be one of the most important educational problems in the United States. The gap, that begins in elementary school and continues to persist throughout elementary and secondary schools produces differences in high school graduation rates, college and career attainment, and ultimately socio-economic differences in income between the two groups (Slavin & Madden, 2006). In order to properly understand the complexity of the achievement gap, it is important to consider the pattern of systematic exclusion and racial segregation of African American students throughout the history of education.

An example of the achievement gap in the United States is clearly seen in the Black – White test score gap. The Black – White test score gap has generated a storm of controversy ever since it became possible to measure quantitatively cognitive skills by race. The debate over the Black – White test score gap began with the publication of the Coleman report (1966) and its conclusions that family structure and poverty rather than school resources were the major contributors to the gap (Sohn, 2012). More recent literature on the Black – White test score gap and school accountability refutes the conclusion of the Coleman report. Gaddis and Lauen (2014) argue that school interventions



can work to close or eliminate the racial test score gap, but a lack of quality teachers and insufficient resources in high poverty urban schools plays a significant role in maintaining racial inequities. The reality is that the Black – White test score gap contributes to the achievement gap beginning in Kindergarten and persists throughout African American students' schooling experience. Furthermore, without meaningful school intervention the racial inequities for African American students will most likely continue.

The achievement gap has negatively affected African American students and had devastating effects on urban communities (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Over time, systemic inequities have developed in urban schools that continue to contribute to the achievement gap. The lack of curricular resources, access to high quality teachers, and rigorous courses of study are missing in many urban schools that are highly populated by African American students. The presence of structural inequities in urban public schools exacerbates the problems of the achievement gap. The structural inequities throughout public education have negatively impacted the academic achievement outcomes of African American students and created deficit mindsets in many people that work with historically marginalized students (Rodriguez, 2014). Wiggan (2007) argues that deficit mindsets significantly impact teachers' perception of African American students. These perceptions many times create negative teacher expectations of African American students. Teacher expectations play an important role in student achievement outcomes and unfortunately the tendency for teachers is to provide

African American students a watered down curriculum, filled with low level tasks and meaningless busy work because of their assumptions about African American students' academic deficiencies (Delpit, 2006).

Instructional practices that are embedded within a school have a large impact on the potential performance of African American students. The use of culturally relevant pedagogy connects the culture of the students to the curriculum taught to them (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally relevant pedagogy attempts to get teachers to rethink instructional practices to increase the educational performance of diverse student populations (Gay, 2010). Culturally relevant pedagogy builds students by honoring the students' cultural background and then utilizing it as a foundation to increase the educational outcomes for students.

The low academic achievement of African American students has been compounded by the classroom and institutional practices and policies of urban schools. The commitment of urban schools to hiring and retaining highly skilled, effective teachers is an integral component of addressing the African American achievement gap. The trend throughout urban communities across the nation has been alarming with large percentages of uncertified teachers being placed in urban schools with students of color (Haycock, 2006). In order to strategically and realistically attack the achievement gap, identifying and retaining quality teachers in high poverty schools must be a top priority for school leaders.

When schools make it a priority to find and retain excellent teachers, school leaders have the opportunity to create institutional structures that can break the cycle of underperforming urban schools. These schools that break the cycle and create institutions that create rigorous programs with high academics regardless of students' racial background and socioeconomic conditions are referred to as high performing urban schools. High performing urban schools can have a positive impact on student achievement by developing systemic structures, robust systems, and leadership practices throughout the organization (Marzano, 2003). High performing urban schools develop strong organizational culture and leadership practices that focus strongly on student learning, and the development and monitoring of this process is a key responsibility of the school principal.

### School Principal Leadership

School principals play a key role in developing the structures and systems necessary to improve the outcomes for urban schools and more specifically African American students. We know that teachers are the most important in-school determinant of student learning (Hanushek, Kain, Rivkin, Branch, & National Bureau of Economic Research, 2005). Consequently, it is the collective community of teachers, led by the principal, that create effective educational environments for all students.

Numerous debates have ensued over the definition of leadership and what attributes effective leaders possess. Bass (1990) and Schafer (2005) have offered definitions of leadership that have been scrutinized by the academic community. More recently Payzant (2011) developed the 17 characteristics of “Effective Urban School Leaders”. Payzant’s framework moves away from a traditional definition and instead discusses the attributes and behaviors that effective leaders possess or develop over time.

School principals are tasked with the responsibility of being effective instructional leaders for the campuses they serve. To be an effective instructional leader of a highly diverse urban school, principals must possess leadership skills and behaviors that will support the needs of diverse students and teachers. The effective school principal serves as an instructional leader who affects school climate and student achievement (Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982).

Principals that make developing a healthy school culture a priority understand the power that school culture has to transform a leader and the school they serve. It is imperative that urban school principals constantly strive to transform their institutions into schools that meet the needs of at-risk, marginalized students. School principals are compelled to create schools that are flexible and responsive to the needs of diverse students. One way to accomplish this is through the use of social justice leadership practices. Social justice leadership is focused on challenging the systemic inequities that exists in schools and then works to eradicate them. When structural inequities exists in schools, it

is the principal's responsibility to lead their school while keeping a keen eye on issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and disabilities (Dantley & Tillman, 2006). When school principals lead, while considering issues of equity, they increase the level of concern for all stakeholders to support the needs of students in urban schools.

The achievement gap continues to persist across the country throughout urban schools. As the needs of African American students continue to be marginalized by a history of racism and deficit thinking, school principals must identify and employ best practices in classroom instruction and institutional behavior. In order to accomplish this, school principals must delicately balance empirical practice as well as theory to build the schools and institutions needed in our urban communities. When principals consider the impact of race, the history of educational exclusion for African Americans, institutional behavior, and principal leadership behavior, we began to shape the mindsets necessary to develop effective urban school principal leaders.

### Statement of the Problem

The literature documenting the achievement gap of African American students details a historic pattern of underachievement due to structural inequities that exist in public education throughout America. Furthermore, the literature on the impact of principal leadership shows the importance of leadership on classroom instruction as well as overall institutional practices. The

research on leadership details a number of theories and frameworks that can be used when developing schools and systems of equity to increase the academic achievement for African American students. Additionally, many models are presented in the research on the use of leadership frameworks to create effective urban schools. However, little research has been conducted that critically and comprehensively describes the experiences of principals as well as the characteristics they possess as they work to narrow the achievement gap for African American students. This study is designed to fill this gap by seeking to provide a comprehensive composite of the practices and experiences of urban school principals working to close the achievement gap.

#### Purpose of the Study

The objective of this phenomenological inquiry is to critically analyze the leadership practices and behaviors of Inland Empire urban school principals as they lead their respective schools towards closing the achievement gap of African American students. The impact of school principals on student learning and achievement is well documented throughout the literature and this inquiry seeks to focus on the leadership practices of principals and their experiences in leading an urban school working to close the gap.

The intent of this research is to assist school and district leaders, researchers, as well as policy makers in identifying best practices while serving African American students. Furthermore, the study will support leaders crafting

policies that will equip and empower school principals to design and institute systemic practices that create equitable schools for all students regardless of race or culture. Additionally, this research will provide valuable information on effective instructional practices for African American students. Lastly, this study will provide an in depth analysis of the challenges associated with closing the achievement gap and the requisite skills needed by principals to effectively lead schools that are challenged with this phenomenon.

### Research Questions

This phenomenological study will utilize narrative inquiry, detailed field notes, and secondary data analysis to provide a comprehensive picture of the principal participants' behaviors and practices as they lead their schools towards closing the achievement gap. Although this study does not serve to generalize principal leadership practices or behaviors, the study will address the following questions specifically through an analysis of the experiences and perspectives of those principals participating in the study:

1. What are the perceptions, experiences, and challenges of Inland Empire public school principals who are successfully closing the achievement gap for African American students?
2. How do Inland Empire public school principals develop leadership strategies and practices that successfully close the achievement gap for low-income African American students?

3. In what ways does research question 1 and research question 2 help us develop equitable leaders, leadership practices, and schools that promote the success and achievement of African American students?

### Significance of the Study

This study will add to the body of literature describing the experiences of Inland Empire urban school principals as they lead their schools and work to close the achievement gap of African American students. Understanding the achievement gap mandates an understanding of the historical systemic exclusion of African Americans in school (Howard, 2010), and how those exclusionary practices still permeates schools today. School site principals are powerful influences on communities, teachers, and institutions and have the ability to transcend the effects of the past exclusionary practices in education. The ability of principals to understand their role and how they lead their schools toward increased equity is a key component of this study. Therefore, this study is intended for researchers wanting to describe and analyze more critically the leadership practices and behaviors of principals serving in urban schools.

### Assumptions

This study presumes the use of standardized testing instruments such as the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE), California Standard Test (CST), and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) are valid measures of student progress.



This study also presumes that a span of three years is a sufficient period of time to determine growth and progress of African American students in a high poverty high needs school. It is also presumed that three years is a sufficient period of time for a school principal to develop the necessary culture and systems to affect African American student achievement. It is further presumed that effective leadership can be defined and measured in terms of standardized test performance. Lastly, it is presumed that this study will help create a construct for effective urban school principal leadership.

### Limitations of the Study

Within a qualitative research inquiry the researcher must fully acknowledge and accept the high potential for researcher bias. The researcher is a school site principal, as well as principal within the district where the research is being conducted. He has ten years of experience as a school site administrator and is considered a successful principal by school district leadership. Additionally, he is an African American male student who graduated with high honors from the district where the research is being conducted. While conducting a narrative inquiry, the aforementioned factors can enhance the research lens for critically analyzing the data collected during the interview process.

It must also be stated that this study does not aim to make vast generalizations about the achievement gap and school site principal leadership. In contrast, this phenomenological investigation will seek depth over breadth and

attempt to learn subtle nuances of life experiences as opposed to aggregate evidence (Ambert, Adler, Adler, & Detzner, 1995). The principal aim of the study is to describe the experiences of Inland Empire urban school principals.

### Definition of Terms

The following terms are used frequently in this text:

1. Achievement Gap – Is the term used to describe the difference in educational and social outcomes for White students versus African American students. The gap is reflected most clearly in grades, standardized test scores, high school graduation rates, placement in special education and advanced placement courses, and suspension and expulsion rates (Darling-Hammond, 2007).
2. Critical Race Theory – A theory used to help explain marginalizing practices that exist. The theoretical framework establishes perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform aspects of education that maintain the marginal position and subordination of Black and Latino students (North Carolina State Department of Public Education, Division of Accountability, 2000).
3. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy – An instructional framework that recognizes the uniqueness of student culture by using cultural knowledge and prior experiences of diverse students to make learning more relevant and effective for them (Gay, 2010).

4. Excellence Gap – An alternative perspective to the achievement gap, where African American student academic performance is not measured against White student performance but rather measuring against a benchmark of excellence.
5. Leadership – The management of others by persuasion and inspiration, rather than direct or implied coercion (Schafer, 2005).
6. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) – An assessment authorized by the United States Congress to measure the academic progress of students in English Language Arts and mathematics at the ages of 9, 13, and 17.
7. School Principal – The educator who has executive authority for a school.
8. Servant Leadership – A leadership style that promotes the valuing and development of people, the building of community, the practice of authenticity, and the providing of leadership for the good of those which the leader serves (Laub, 1999).
9. Social Justice Leadership – A leadership style that emphasizes a focus on leaders who advocate, lead, and keep at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other marginalizing factors in the United States (Theoharis, 2007).

10. Transformational Leadership – A leadership style that enhances the motivation, morale, and performance of individuals within an organization. This leadership style describes the importance of leaders possessing the ability to inspire their staff to work with more energy, commitment, and purpose (Burns, 1978).

### Summary

This study addresses the experiences and practices of urban schools principals leading schools as they work to close the achievement gap for African American students within one Inland Empire comprehensive school district. In order to meet the needs of all students and create schools of excellence and equity, school principals must understand the necessary mindsets and habits of effective leaders to increase the student achievement outcomes. More specifically, then, the challenge is to create models of effective urban school principal leadership that will create schools that meet the needs of our diverse student populations and close the persistent achievement gap that has plagued public schools for far too long.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

This literature review examined the school experiences of African American students. More specifically, this review of the literature focuses on the achievement gap that African American students experience, and a review of teaching pedagogy, school models, and leadership practices that have worked to decrease or eliminate the achievement gap. The literature review is divided into three thematic areas. The first section examines the literature pertaining to the causes of the achievement gap for African American students. The second section analyzes effective pedagogical practices, which have been identified in the literature as promising practices to produce academic success for African American students. The third section focuses on principal leadership theory and practices designed to address issues of equity and social justice, in an effort to close the achievement gap of African American students.

#### African Americans and the Achievement Gap

##### Establishing the Gap

Explanations for disparities in the academic achievement of low income, minority, and mainstream students have a long, complex, and contested history in the United States as well as other nations (Banks, 2009). A thorough discourse

on educational opportunities in the United States would include an examination of the history of education in this nation and would reveal a pattern of highly excluded and racially segregated groups who historically were denied equal access to schooling for centuries (Gutierrez, 2004; Lomawaima & McCarthy, 1999; Min, 2004; Myrdal & Bok, 2003; Tyack, 2007).

The education system of the United States has historically marginalized students of color and those from diverse backgrounds. The literature documents the experiences of enslaved Africans and African Americans who were excluded from public education legally through the Jim Crow era (Walker, 1996). Although a rich history of educational accolades and achievements exists for African Americans, they continue to be marginalized simply because of the color of their skin. For more than 300 hundred years, African Americans have fought for the educational imperatives of access, equality, opportunity, freedom, and justice (Murtadha & Watts, 2005). As African Americans and other groups have been excluded from educational opportunities over the last four centuries, it is disheartening to see those groups continue to be at or near the bottom of the achievement hierarchy today.

The long history of marginalization of African Americans in schools and society has produced ideals and beliefs about African Americans and their ability to be productive citizens and students. As a result, scholars and education practitioners have been working to decrease the achievement gap for African

American students. Howard (2010) advises the following regarding closing the achievement gap:

Any dialogue concerned with a thorough investigation into how to reduce or eliminate achievement gaps between certain student groups must be informed by both a historical understanding of the experiences of those groups in the United States, and an examination of the correlation between their systemic exclusion from educational opportunities and the current state of their educational performance. (p.11)

#### Achievement Gap

The achievement gap is the term used to describe the difference in educational and social outcomes for White students versus African American students. The gap is reflected most clearly in grades, standardized test scores, high school graduation rates, placement in special education and advanced placement courses, and suspension and expulsion rates (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2011; Steele & Aronson, 1998; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2009).

Since 1971, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has monitored the academic performance of 9, 13, and 17-year-old students to track the long-term performance of students in reading and mathematics. The assessments are administered by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and authorized by Congress to gather data across the nation on student performance. According to the 2012 NAEP test data (National Center for

Education Statistics (ED), 2013), scores in reading and mathematics among 9, 13, and 17-year old African American students have shown overall gains.

However, White students continue to outperform African American students on reading and mathematics assessment by wide margins. According, to the 2012 NAEP data:

- For 9-year old students in reading, White students outperformed African American students by 23 points.
- For 13-year old students in reading, White students outperformed African American students by 23 points.
- For 17-year old students in reading, White students outperformed African American students by 26 points.
- For 9-year old students in mathematics, White students outperformed African American students by 25 points.
- For 13-year old students in mathematics, White students outperformed African American students by 28 points.
- For 17-year old students in mathematics, White students outperformed African American students by 26 points.

There is evidence of improvement in the reading and mathematics scores for African American students over the last 40 years. However, the persistence of a 20+ point gap in the scores of White students over African American students warrants additional exploration of the underlying causes of the achievement gap.



Darling-Hammond (2007) observed the gaps in educational achievement between White and non-Asian “minority” students remains large and the differences in access to educational opportunities are growing more than fifty years after Brown v. Board of Education (1954) decision (p. 318). This lack of access is having devastating effects on urban communities all over America. Many young people in the United States, especially those who are low-income students of color, do not get exposure to the same resources and curriculum as their white peers. In extreme cases, children of color do not receive even the minimum education needed to become literate and join the labor market (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

Although the demand for an educated workforce has increased, only 69% of high school students graduated with a standard diploma in 2000, down from 77% in 1969 (Barton, 2005). Recent statistics show that graduation statistics are even bleaker for African Americans. According to the 2013 *Public School Graduates and Dropouts from the Common Core of Data* report, across the United States, the Average Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR) was 83.0 percent for White students versus 66.1 percent for Black students. Likewise, the dropout rates of White and Black students demonstrate the existing achievement gap. The calculated dropout rate for White students was 2.3 percent compared to a rate of 5.5 percent for Black students (National Center for Education Statistics (ED), 2013). This is a dire situation because as the achievement gap as persists, the incarceration rate for Black 25- to 29- year-old males is 13 percent compared

to a 2 percent rate for White males in that age group. For young Black males without a high school diploma, about as many are in prison as are employed. It is estimated that more than half of all Black males who do not have a high school diploma have a prison record, compared to one in 10 White males (Coley & Barton, 2006). From the period of 1980 to 2000, three times as many African American men were added to the nation's prisons systems as were added to its colleges. Most prison inmates are high school dropouts, and more than half of the adult prison population has literacy skills below the threshold needed to successfully enter the labor market (Barton & Coley, 1996).

Rodriguez (2014) compiled more than 10 years of research on the drop out crisis of African American and Latino students and he concluded that our failure to respond to the drop out crisis has devastating implications domestically as well as globally. Rodriguez (2014) posits that in order to properly address the dropout crisis, it is crucial to move away from the simplistic deficit oriented mindsets, and instead it is imperative that leaders develop "critical, compassionate, relentless" habits of mind in order to create viable solutions (p. 117).

Garibaldi (1997) conducted a thorough study analyzing the educational progress of African American students from kindergarten to university degree attainment. The study spanned 40 years and demonstrates the constant underachievement of African American students. The study illustrates the importance of addressing the negative indicators that perpetuate the

achievement gap between White and African American students. These include increasing the rigor of curriculum, raising expectations and educational standards for African American students, as well as establishing higher expectations for teachers, and increased involvement by parents.

Recurring explanations of educational inequality among policy makers, and everyday people typically blame children and their families for lack of effort, poor child rearing, a culture of poverty, or inadequate genes (Herrnstein & Murray, 1996). This point of view presupposes a number of variables about student race and U.S. education. This logic assumes that educational opportunity in the U.S. is equal for all students. The reality of education in the U.S. for minority students is that the underachievement of minority students is more a function of the unequal access to key educational resources. Additionally, the recruitment and retention of highly skilled teachers coupled with rigorous curriculum is absent in many highly diverse urban schools. In a study by Darling-Hammond (2004), data prepared for school finance cases across the country found that on every tangible measure – from qualified teachers and class sizes to textbooks, computers, facilities, and curriculum offerings – schools serving large numbers of students of color have significantly fewer resources than schools serving mostly White students. More specifically, in California, many high-minority schools are so severely overcrowded that they run a multi-track schedule offering a shortened school day and school year, lack basic textbooks and materials, do not offer the courses students need to be college eligible, and

are staffed by a steady parade of untrained, inexperienced, and temporary teachers (Oakes, 2004).

### Excellence Gap

There is no question that the academic achievement of African American students is, in general, far below their potential (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). Hilliard proposed an alternative perspective to the achievement gap when he described the “Excellence Gap” that exists for African American students. He explained that the gap should not be thought of as a gap between Black and White students. Instead, it should be thought of as a gap between the current performance of African American students and levels of excellence. Hilliard explains, “When we choose excellent performance as the goal, academically and socially, we change the teaching and learning paradigm in fundamental ways. By setting the required performance level at excellence, we require excellent performance to be articulated (Perry et al., 2003, p.138). The excellence that the researcher refers to can be achieved by recognizing the importance of quality teaching for African American students.

Hilliard and Sizemore (1984) authored a report for the *Taskforce for Black Academic and Cultural Excellence for the National Alliance of Black Educators*. In their report, the researchers identified performance criteria across various content areas and determined that college preparatory curriculum was well within the reach of the general population of students, including the population of African American students currently underperforming other student

groups (Hilliard & Sizemore, 1984). Hilliard and Sizemore stress the importance of excellent teaching as a means of closing the excellence gap. The challenge for teachers and schools leaders is ensuring excellent teaching and learning opportunities for all students.

Plucker, Burroughs, and Song (2010) analyzed the Grade 4 and Grade 8 English Language Arts and Mathematics National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores for the years 2003 to 2007. The researchers sought to determine the extent of the excellence gap that existed in various racial groups. High achievement or excellence was defined in the study as, achieving the advanced levels determined by NAEP or receiving scores that place the student in the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile of either the national sample or one of three subgroups: Black, Hispanic, or eligible for free or reduced lunch. Since the inception of NCLB, the gap between Black and White students scoring at the advanced level of the NAEP assessment has widened. From 1996 to 2007, the percentage of White students scoring at the advanced level increased by 4.5 percentage points while the percentage of Black students increased by 0.8 percent. In grade 8 reading, the percentage of Black students achieving at the advanced level increased by 0.1 percent while the percentage of White students achieving at the advanced level increased by 0.4 percent (Plucker, Burroughs, & Song, 2010). Thus, as the data and empirical evidence shows, the achievement gap of African American students is a complex issue that must be addressed to improve the education system for all students.

While, based upon research, we see the challenges of the achievement gap for students and the need to move towards a system of excellence, we must remember that the achievement gap is a complex issue that involves challenges within and outside of school. Although it is not possible to know for sure, it is suspected that black children often attend schools with fewer real resources than predominantly white schools in the same school district. The source of these resource differences is not necessarily race, but rather the correlation between race and family resources (Peterson, 2006).

### Causes and Correlates of the Achievement Gap

#### Parental and Community Impact

Students come from diverse families and communities. If educators are to form partnerships with families that improve the achievement of students, they must understand the environment outside of school in which students live (Epstein, 2011). Research supports that poverty stricken children are more likely to have conditions that impede their learning and that these conditions usually include poor health care, inadequate prenatal care, frequent transitions in living conditions, very little educational resources in the home, parents with very little education, and wavering family structures (Rothstein, Jacobsen, & Wilder, 2008; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2009). Consequently, many educators enter schools without adequately understanding the backgrounds, languages, religions, cultures, histories, structures, races, social classes, and

other characteristics and goals of their students and families. Without such information, it is impossible for educators to communicate effectively with the people who matter to the children in their schools, classrooms, and communities (Bryk & Schneider, 2004).

Social scientists accept that parents and families of Black students engage in practices that they believe to be in the best interest of their children, and these practices may diverge from practices of parents and families of White students (Coll, Meyer, & Brillion, 2013). Clark (1984) conducted an analysis of Black families and the interactions they had with their children. Through a series of 10 case studies, Clark investigated academically successful students that came from impoverished families. The researcher found that the interactions and communication styles of parents had a direct impact on the performance of students. Additionally, he found these parenting practices and educational orientations to be the difference between parents of academically successful students and the parents of students who were not academically successful (Clark, 1984). Clark's investigation is an important addition to the knowledge of how families can contribute to their student's success in schools because it describes in detail the types of activities, interactional styles, and support systems that are found in the homes of successful students.

Family life is known to play an important role in explaining a child's educational achievement. Studies have shown that mother's education, father's education, family income, and parental relationships with the child have a major

impact on student achievement (Peterson, 2006). We know how important families can be to decreasing the achievement gap in students, but we also must consider the role of race when considering how student achievement for African American students can be increased. The short-changing of school and other educational institutions attended by black children, as evidenced by subpar facilities, unqualified teachers, and lack of rigorous curriculum has resulted in de facto segregation and has resulted in weak educational achievement of African American students (Finn, 2006). Thus, to address the achievement gap we must consider the role of race and how issues of race impact student performance.

### Race and Racism

Researchers and policy makers have long been interested in improving public schools. Over the past four decades, there have been numerous discussions of student achievement and school failure (Ballantine & Hammack, 2011; Desimone, 1999; Gardner, 2011; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Within this time, the debate over the causes and consequences of racial differences in achievement has been at the heart of the nation's social and political life (Wiggin, 2007).

Wiggin (2007) conducted a review of the major developments in student achievement research over the past century. In his review, he examines explanations given for the racial differences that exist in schools performance. More specifically, he investigated studies of genetic deficiency, social class and cultural poverty, low teacher expectancy, and student



oppositional identity. Wiggan's analysis found that teacher expectancy played a major role in student outcomes. As an alternative to family background and cultural affiliation and as an explanation for low student achievement, teacher's expectations can have a negative effect on students' performance (Mayer, 2002; Rist, 1970).

According to this perspective, the problems of racism and mainstream White hegemony are pervasive in public education (Clark, 1984; Rist, 1970) and lead teachers to expect little from students who are not White and middle class. Wiggan also noted that according to the teacher expectancy perspective, teachers are often biased against Black students because they tend to underperform their White classmates. The tendency is for some teachers to justify teaching Black students less because of their assumptions about Black students' deficiencies (Delpit, 2006).

Wiggan concluded that the teacher-expectancy theory was flawed. He explained that the theory assumed that students were passive and that teacher expectations determined student outcomes. Teacher expectations have important implications for student achievement, however higher or lower student achievement is not a function of teacher expectations. Wiggan (2007) proposed other factors such as agency and self-efficacy be explored as the factors that explain increased student achievement.

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) explored the impact of race on Black students of all socioeconomic backgrounds. In their analysis they discovered that Black

students develop “oppositional identities” that lead them to view their schooling experience as forced assimilation into the dominant White culture. In this framework, those groups that have been marginalized by White European culture come to see academic success as “acting White.” Fordham, Ogbu conducted, and ethnographic study of both successful and unsuccessful students in a predominantly black high school. The researchers concluded that Black students who cope with the burden of acting white experience negative effects on the academic performance of both underachieving and high-achieving students (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Furthermore, they found that Black students who perform at high levels may be ostracized by their peers as traitors and “sellouts” and may be forced to choose between maintaining ties to their peers and achieving success in school.

Elements of institutional racism still pervade schools throughout the United States. Symbolic racism sustains the status quo and is reflective of White hegemony and dominant ideologies of how society should be in more abstract terms (Scott, 2013). This explains why most Americans support principles for equality for ethnic minority groups yet are not willing to support programs designed to implement these principles (Sears & Henry, 2003).

Solórzano and Yosso (2001) discuss Critical Race Theory as a way to explain the contradictory practices that exists in schools. The United States has a long tradition of marginalizing African American students, and from the Critical Race Theory perspective, we can begin to understand the African American

student's experience with the pervasiveness of racism and the schooling of children of color.

### Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) is closely related to an earlier legal movement called critical legal studies (CLS). Critical legal studies is a leftist legal movement that challenged the traditional legal scholarship that focused on doctrinal and policy analysis (Gordon, 1990) in favor of a form of law that spoke to the specificity of individuals and groups in social and cultural context. Much of the CLS ideology has been linked to the work of Gramsci and his notion of "hegemony." This hegemony causes the continued legitimacy of oppressive structures in American society (Unger, 1983). CLS scholars critiqued mainstream legal ideology for its portrayal of U.S. society as a meritocracy, but failed to include racism in their critique. Thus, CRT became a logical outgrowth of the discontent of legal scholars of color (Ladson-Billings, 1999).

In one of the key writings on CRT (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995) the authors noted that there is no set of doctrines or methodologies that all CRT scholars subscribe to. However, CRT scholars are unified by two common interests: understanding how a regime of white supremacy and its subordination of people of color have been created and maintained in America, and changing the bond that exists between law and racial power (Crenshaw et al., 1995). The common focus of CRT theorists has enabled CRT to find its way into the educational literature.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) raised the subject as a challenge to traditional multicultural paradigms. The researchers argued that race continues to be salient in American society, that the nation was premised on property rights rather than human rights, and that the intersection of race and poverty could still serve as a powerful analytical tool for explaining social and educational inequities.

Tate (1997) continued the conversation by providing a comprehensive description of CRT. His description provided a way to better inform the educational community about the possible uses of CRT in education. In his discussion, he cites Calmore (1992), who defined CRT as:

A form of oppositional scholarship that challenges the universality of white experience/judgment as the authoritative standard that binds people of color and normatively measures, directs, controls, and regulates the terms of proper thought, expression, presentation, and behavior. As represented by legal scholars, critical race theory challenges the dominant discourses on race and racism as they relate to law. The task is to identify values and norms that have been disguised and subordinated in the law...Critical race scholars...seek to demonstrate that their experiences as people of color are legitimate, appropriate, and effective bases for analyzing the legal system and racial subordination. (p. 2161)

Ladson-Billings (1999) conducted an inquiry into critical race theory and the preparation of teachers for diverse student populations. The conclusions

made by the researcher suggest that preparing teachers to have a critical race theory perspective is difficult, if not impossible work. She suggest that teacher educators committed to preparing teachers for effective practice in diverse schools and communities are working with either small, specialized groups of like-minded prospective teachers or resistant, often hostile prospective teachers. She further states that many teacher preparation programs treat issues of diversity as a necessary evil imposed by the state and/or accrediting agency (Ladson-Billings, 1999). This presents a challenge for leaders as they search for teachers willing to engage in critical analysis of the dominant discourse of education.

### African Americans and Instructional Practice

#### Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Culturally relevant pedagogy research has developed a focus on teachers and programs that fail to utilize practices that work for diverse student populations (García, 2000). Culturally relevant pedagogy is a “critical pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 472). Its main goal is to get educators to rethink instructional practice in classrooms in an effort to improve the educational performance of African American, Latino, Native American, and various Asian American students (Gay, 2010). The challenge in this framework is dealing with the intricate merger

of culture and pedagogy. Many researchers and practitioners have yet to realize the complexity of merging culture and pedagogy. While it may improve student learning, researchers continue to evaluate its effectiveness for helping culturally diverse students improve academically. The marriage of culture and pedagogy is built upon a comprehensive and informed set of knowledge and skills that many practitioners often lack in their attempts to engage diverse students in the teaching and learning process (Howard, 2010).

Culturally relevant pedagogy is more than just a way of teaching or a simple set of practices embedded in lesson and unit plans. Howard (2010) explains that:

Culturally relevant pedagogy embodies a professional, political, cultural, ethical, and ideological disposition that supersedes mundane teaching acts; it is centered in fundamental beliefs about teaching, learning, students, their families, and their communities, and an unyielding commitment to see students' success become less rhetoric and more of a reality. More specifically, culturally relevant pedagogy seeks to recognize the rich and varied cultural wealth, knowledge, and skills that students from diverse groups bring to schools. Furthermore, it aims to develop dynamic teaching practices, multicultural content, multiple means of assessment, and a philosophical view of teaching that is dedicated to nurturing student academic, social, emotional, cultural, psychological, and physiological well being. (p.67-68)

Culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994), also referred to as culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010), and culturally synchronous teaching, is viewed in the literature as the leading theoretical model in producing academically successful African American students (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999; Delpit, 2006; Michele Foster, 1993; M Foster & Peele, 1999; Gay, 2010; Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1999).

Gloria Ladson-Billings created the term “culturally relevant pedagogy” to describe the philosophy and practice of teachers who have been identified as successful teachers of African American students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). She conducted interviews and observations of teachers identified as having success with African American students in a predominantly African American, low-income elementary school district in Northern California. Eight exemplary teachers were examined in the study to understand their pedagogical practices. The study was conducted in four phases:

1. An ethnographic interview to discuss teacher background, philosophy of teaching, ideas about curriculum, classroom management, and parent and community involvement.
2. Unannounced classroom observations conducted by the researcher over the span of two years, collecting field notes and audiotapes of classroom instruction.

3. Videotaping of classroom instruction after the researcher familiarized herself with the teachers being analyzed.

4. The teachers worked as a research collective to analyze the videotapes of classroom instruction to analyze and interpret their own and one another's practice. (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p.472)

During the final phase of the study, emergent themes derived from the initial interviews that were confirmed by the instructional practices observed in the teacher videos. The emergent themes were used to create a framework of theory and practice, which identified student outcomes, personal characteristics of the teachers, and instructional strategies that made the classroom experiences of African American students more engaging and beneficial (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Ladson-Billings termed this framework, "culturally relevant pedagogy."

Gay (2010) suggests that culturally relevant pedagogy recognizes the uniqueness of student culture by using "the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant to and effective for them" (p.29). She stressed that culturally relevant pedagogy is taught to and through the strengths of diverse students. In its purest state culturally relevant pedagogy is validating and affirming of the unique gifts diverse students bring to the classroom.



Research conducted by Irvine (1990) suggested that many teachers develop low expectations for African American male students. Her research found that African American male students are more likely to be (a) labeled deviant and negatively described by teachers, (b) have their abilities be inaccurately assessed by teachers, (c) receive nonverbal criticism from teachers, and (d) be disciplined and referred to the office (Irvine, 1990).

Culturally relevant teaching practices enable educators to move past the preconceived beliefs about African American male students. Rather than accept failure from their students culturally relevant teachers “cajoled, nagged, pestered, and bribed the students to work at high intellectual levels” (Ladson-Billings, 1995). African American male students must constantly grapple with the stigmas that come with their performance in school. On one end exists low expectations of academic performance from teachers and on the other end exists stigmas and chastisement from peers when African American males students achieve. Culturally relevant pedagogy aims to assist in the development of a “relevant black personality” that allows African American children to choose academic excellence yet still identify with African and African American culture (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) analyzed how teaching with cultural sensitivity works to counteract the belief that successful African American students believe that they must “act white,” or disassociate themselves from their African

American culture and peers in order to be viewed positively by their teachers. Fordham and Ogbu counteracted this phenomenon by exploring how culturally relevant teachers incorporated the experiences, language, customs, and values of their students into their instructional program. The researchers concluded that culturally relevant teachers assisted students in identifying, understanding, and critiquing the current inequities that exists in schools and other institutions across society.

Foster and Peele (1999) coauthored a paper describing the characteristics of successful teachers of African American male students. More specifically, Foster and Peele sought to explore the teachers' belief that African American students can be academically successful. They stated:

Expert teachers of African American males take responsibility for teaching and engaging all of their students in learning, whether they are indifferent, resistant, or achieving significantly below grade level. Convinced that even seemingly recalcitrant students enjoy learning, expert teachers believe that they can teach even those whom others find impossible to teach. In fact, expert teachers take pride in their ability to reach students whom other teachers cannot.(p.10)

This study emphasized the fundamental belief that African American students are capable learners. The study found that “expert teachers” of African

American male students focus on their students' achievement by creating a culture, environment, and space conducive for student success.

Cooper (2003) conducted a study of the beliefs and practices of three White public school primary teachers. Key members of the Black community selected the highly effective teachers for the study. Using a qualitative case study methodology, Cooper sought to understand effective White teachers of Black children in light of community preferences. More specifically, the purpose of the study was to provide a "holistic and meaningful" (Yin, 1994) description of what good teaching of Black children by White teachers looks like to a particular Black community by accepting its choices of effective teachers (Cooper, 2003). The study concluded that it is imperative for teacher education programs to recognize the importance of assistance and training for White teachers in this area. Cooper expands on this notion stating:

The nomination of Mrs. Parker, Mrs. Nelson, and Mrs. Woods as effective teachers forces us to see beyond their limitations for the simple reason the community did. It also indicates that teacher educators must avoid codifying culturally relevant and synchronistic teaching. Grounded, as they should be in the lives of Black children, they must remain elastic enough processes to accommodate both the known and the unexpected. (p.425)

Irvine (1990) wrote that in the absence of the ideal, the best teachers of Black children share the community's belief in "the power of education over

oppression and discrimination and values concepts such as discipline, resilience, achievement, and hard work (p.92). The values have to be cultivated in teachers so that they understand how to effectively connect and engage Black children in the educational process.

Culturally relevant pedagogy creates both the academic rigor needed as well as the cultural hook necessary for African American students to feel connected to school. A host of scholars (Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2010; Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Murrell, 2002; Noguera, 2008; Perry et al., 2003) claim that many African American students will continue to be disengaged from school and underperforming as long as educational institutions refuse to recognize and honor the culture of African American students and create educational institutions, curricula, and leadership capacities that are responsive to the students' needs (Gay, 2010). Furthermore, culturally relevant pedagogy enables teachers and school leaders to develop meaningful understanding of students' cultures to best create institutions that will effectively respond to the needs of individual students as well as the systemic achievement gap of African American students.

### Effective Institutional Practices

It is well documented in the literature how important quality teaching is in the urban classroom. Effective teachers are an integral part of children's intellectual and social development. During a school year students who have the

most effective teachers will gain much more knowledge than students who have the least effective teachers (Jackson-Newman, 2008; Marzano, 2003). Haycock (2004) expanded the argument of the importance of quality teachers in highly diverse urban classrooms. She noted that in most states with reliable data, poor and minority children are more likely than other children to be taught by uncertified teachers.

The number of uncertified teachers in high poverty schools is alarming and the research has clearly shown the importance of quality teachers. Haycock explored several teacher quality variables such as certification, experience, and subject matter expertise to begin to understand the challenges of recruitment and retention of teachers in urban schools. The research uncovered seven categories that work to reduce inequities in teacher quality. Unfortunately, the progress and implementation of those strategies have proven slow. Alternatively, Haycock recommended five elements that would address the root causes of the issue:

- Value-added assessment
  - A differentiated salary structure
  - No contractual burdens on districts
  - Help, followed by decisive action when results lag
  - More research, then new accountability systems for higher education
- (Haycock, 2004).

She concludes by proposing that the adoption of the aforementioned practices would begin to turn around the attitudes, practices, and, most

importantly, student achievement outcomes (Haycock, 2004). Haycock's study exemplifies the lack of progress educational institutions have made in the area of improving teacher quality in urban schools. Furthermore, it shows the lack of progress by education professionals to adopt the practices and theoretical work of researchers focused on improving education outcomes for diverse students. Haycock's recommendations focus on an extremely data driven perspective, thus creating very clear markers about how effective teachers could be monitored and measured for effectiveness. Where Haycock's recommendations fall short are examining teacher's relationship building and cultural sensitivity to the students they serve. The abilities to understand how race and culture influence classroom instruction and student achievement outcomes are a key capacity of teachers and school leaders'

Ladson-Billings (1994) conducted a study to document the instructional practices of highly effective teachers of African American students. Using an ethnographic methodology that included: teacher selection, teacher interviews, classroom observations, and videotaping of classroom instruction enabled the researcher to see in-depth classroom observations that allowed the researcher to understand the patterns and routines of the classroom. Ladson-Billings' inquiry moved away from the traditional mode of objective educational inquiry and instead prioritized a focus on the teachers' reality and authentically capturing that experience (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

In Ladson-Billings' study of eight highly effective teachers of African American students, she concluded that African American students need better schools. She proposed three strategies for a "Vision of a Culturally Relevant School":

- Provide educational self determination
- Honor and respect the students' home culture
- Help African American students understand the world as it is and equip them to change it for the better. (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p.137-139)

Ferguson (2002) built upon Ladson-Billings' work when he recommended specific reforms based on his research of classroom teachers' attitudes, performance, and behaviors:

1. Teachers should not be of the mindset that there are differences in the academic performance levels of different ethnic groups. Teachers need to understand that no matter the ethnic groups all students are capable of performing at the same academic levels;
2. Where there are specific knowledge deficit problems, schools should respond to the specific problems of a particular group while also noting that some different racial groups respond differently to standardized testing;
3. Teachers need to customarily provide encouragement because students respond to and value it; and

4. Schools need to provide a variety of learning materials and expanded educational resources because impoverished students might have disadvantages due to their family's income inequality. (p.37)

Ferguson proposed the *Instructional Tripod* concept as a way to prepare teachers to inspire trust, elicit cooperation, stimulate ambition, and sustain student industriousness. The components of the tripod; content, pedagogy, and relationships provide a framework for connecting with African American students. Of particular importance is the role of teacher encouragement as a source of motivation for African American students. Teacher encouragement assists students in developing authentic school relationships and highlights the importance of strong teacher-student relationships in affecting increased student achievement outcomes for African American students (Ferguson, 2002). Relationship building and teacher encouragement are key practices that can have a positive impact on narrowing the achievement gap.

Benitez, Davidson, & Flaxman (2009) investigated the work of Ferguson and they concluded that teachers and school systems should increase student motivation by altering their classroom instructional practices, habits, and behaviors. Furthermore, they argued the education system needs to implement reforms that enhance African American students' capacity to have strong desire for learning through academic support and they suggest that minorities will become successful when their self-concept and character improve (Benitez, Davidson, & Flaxman, 2009).



Rodriguez (2014) built upon the work of Ferguson (2002) and Benitez et al. (2009) with the introduction of the *10-Point Plan to Respond to the Drop Out Crisis in the United States*. The 10 points of the plan serve to strengthen school cultures and has given school leaders the opportunity to increase student engagement and achievement. The use of multiple strategies presented in the 10-Point Plan can create the equity needed in high poverty urban schools. If taken seriously, the 10-Point Plan can stimulate a much-needed dialogue and a long overdue transformation of education policy and practice in low income schools and communities (Rodriguez, 2014). Table 1 provides the components of the 10-Point Plan along with a key recommendation for implementation.

Table 1

*10-Point Plan to Respond to Drop Out Crisis*

	<b>Plan Component</b>	<b>Implementation Recommendation</b>
1.	Relationships	Schools should prioritize relationships as much as testing.
2.	Student Voice	Schools should use student input to guide professional development, school policy, and school practices.
3.	Students as Intellectuals	Schools should encourage and support teachers who engage in context-relevant projects that put students in the position of researcher.
4.	Learning from the Canaries in the Classroom	Schools should recognize that engaging marginalized students can be the one action that actually engages them in school.
5.	Community Relevant Curriculum	Schools should encourage teachers to incorporate historically, culturally, and community relevant curriculum to engage students, including their own experiences; students often yearn to teach about what they know best – their lives.
6.	Culture of Dialoguing	Schools and districts should dialogue about critical factors attributed to the “opportunity gap,” such as student engagement, curriculum relevance, and the dropout rate and/or graduation rate crisis.
7.	The Struggle to Recognize	The school curriculum recognizes and reflects the realities of students and the community.
8.	School Assets	Schools should provide “alumni highlights” visibly in the school that celebrates successful alumni. Students and teachers begin to develop a sense for what is possible in their everyday work in the classroom
9.	Excellence	Schools should highlight excellence in the classroom by profiling teachers and students who are exceling.
10	Making Public Schools “Public”	School leadership should get in the habit of routinely recognizing important strides forward and successful teaching and learning efforts in the classroom to promote a culture of excellence for students, parents, and the community.

Rodríguez, L. F. (2013). *The Time Is Now: Understanding and Responding to the Black and Latina/o Dropout Crisis in the U.S.* New York: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers.

### High Performing Urban Schools

Historically, the American education system has fallen short when it comes to preparing all children for the future. America’s public schools are

supposed to educate all students but historically America's public schools have had better success educating middle class, more affluent white students than children from diverse backgrounds and students who live in poverty. This is because students in high-poverty schools throughout the nation tend to struggle academically (Steagall, 2012). However, some schools do succeed in assisting their students in achieving high academics, regardless of their background or socioeconomic conditions.

When looking at the attributes of high performing schools, it is important to analyze the structural and systemic practices that exist within the school. Marzano (2003) investigated the practices that contributed to high student performance in high poverty urban schools. His research concluded that effective schools can positively impact student achievement and he further concluded that schools can be held accountable for student achievement outcomes. Effective schools research points to the importance of structures, systems, and leadership practices that must be evident throughout the organization. These structural practices include teacher assignments, resources, curriculum, and instructional time (Marzano, 2003). Systemic practices of effective schools include high levels of accountability, quality professional development, and data-driven decision making (Kannapel & Clements, 2005). Lastly, strong instructional leadership is crucial to creating the conditions, culture, and environment vital to developing and sustaining excellent schools where all students are able to achieve at high levels.

Kannapel and Clements (2005) conducted a study of eight high performing high poverty elementary schools in Kentucky. The researchers conducted a comparison of the eight high performing high poverty schools versus eight low performing high poverty schools. Using a scholastic audit process developed from the 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act, a team of researchers spent one week conducting a thorough analysis of each school. The study sample was identified using the following pre-established criteria:

- State accountability index score of 80 or higher on the spring 2003 Kentucky assessment,
- Percentage of students on free and reduced lunch at or above the state average (50 percent for elementary schools),
- Academic index of 75 or higher for students that participated in the free/reduced lunch program and for minority students,
- Pattern of progress over time on the state test,
- Achievement gap between free/reduced and non-free/reduced lunch students, and between white and minority students, of less than 15 points. (Kannapel & Clements, 2005, p. 7)

Kannapel and Clements found that the audit results showed that the eight high performing high poverty study schools scored significantly higher on:

- Review and alignment of curriculum,
- Individual student assessment and instruction tailored to individual student needs,

- Caring, nurturing environment of high expectations for students,
- Ongoing professional development for staff that was connected to student achievement data,
- Efficient use of resources and instructional time. (Kannapel & Clements, 2005, p. 3)

Kannapel and Clements concluded that the high performing high poverty schools they examined had deeply committed staff who genuinely cared about the community they served and about establishing a culture of high expectations, high performance, collaboration, and mutual respect. Additionally, the researchers noted that the schools changed organically, “from the inside out”. The principal and teachers at most of the schools were not transferred into the school to turn the school around; instead the principals and their staffs worked collaboratively to help all students succeed and make the changes necessary within their schools.

Successful high poverty schools develop a culture where there is a belief that all students can learn. Additionally, the literature on high performing high poverty schools show that high expectations for students are a foundation for accelerated performance. Driven by a need for high expectations, these schools subscribe to the notion that schools can and do make a difference in the performance and outcomes of students (Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Lein, Texas Univ., & And Others, 1997).

Lein, Texas Univ., & And Others (1997) investigated the practices of 26 successful high poverty schools in the state of Texas. In each of these schools, high expectations were heavily embedded in the culture and practices of the schools examined. Common themes that emerged from the study showed the importance of high expectations and included a focus on academic success for every student and an environment of no excuses for student failure. The results of this inquiry provided a self-study and planning guide for schools to use a structured process to begin evaluating and planning school improvement efforts.

Similarly, researchers of high achieving, high poverty schools in North Carolina identified a pervasive “culture of achievement” and reported that “principals set high goals for the school and the teachers which filtered through to students and parents” (North Carolina State Department of Public Education, Division of Accountability, 2000). In a study of 8 North Carolina schools serving large numbers of poor and minority students where black student achievement was high, a major focus of the schools was to build a culture of achievement. This was accomplished by communicating high expectations for teachers, parents, and students through various mechanisms. The researchers found that high expectations and the culture of achievement were evident because of strong leadership throughout the schools. The findings of the study concluded that school leadership was a catalyst for success. Additionally, teachers reported a

tolerance for different teaching styles and an environment where school administrators treated teachers like colleagues.

Leadership and organizational practices are key factors in the success of high performing high poverty schools. In a number of research studies throughout the literature, examples of elementary and middle schools are thriving as high performing high poverty schools. However, a gap exists in the literature related to high performing high poverty high schools.

Ellis (2013) conducted a single case study of a high performing urban high school. Ellis found that in order for impoverished urban students to achieve academic success, the school's organizational and systemic practices needed to be re-cultured to reflect the original mission and vision of the school. Furthermore, she found that the original vision and mission of the school placed an emphasis on high expectations, college readiness, and challenging coursework for all students. The case study discovered that the school's practices were misaligned with the original vision and mission of the school and there was a need to re-culture the school and follow the previously established transformational vision.

In his influential work of 90/90/90 schools (those where 90 percent of students qualify for the free/reduced lunch program, 90 percent are from ethnic minorities, and 90 percent achieved high academic standards) Reeves (2003) analyzed successful high poverty schools and found that these high performing schools had "an emphasis on improvement and a laser-like focus on student

achievement.” In his research, Reeves refutes the critics and cynics that dismiss the reality of high performing high poverty schools. He dismisses that high performing systems in Norfolk, Virginia and Indianapolis, Indiana are no more than frenzied test preparation and low student exclusion practices on test day. He instead insists that high poverty high performing schools are the results of the systematic reform of the organizational and instructional practices incorporated in high poverty schools. This manifest itself in having highly skilled teachers using assessment data to make instructional decisions and modify their instructional practices daily (Reeves, 2003).

Schools have shown various ways to accelerate student achievement for students of diverse backgrounds. The most promising point that arises from the literature is the fact that the research shows high performing high poverty schools often have systemic structures and practices in place that create the conditions for success to occur in diverse urban settings. However, the research further demonstrates that attempting to implement programs and quick fixes in diverse urban schools is futile. Most studies of successful high performing high poverty schools focus on the school leadership, the culture, and climate they create as the keys to developing the conditions necessary for a high performing school and dramatically increased student achievement outcomes.



## Characteristics of Effective Leadership

Understanding and exploring the leadership systems in schools enhances our ability to create and sustain effective schools for all students. School leaders have the influence and power to create high performing schools where all students have the opportunity to thrive. The practices and behaviors of school principals' help to drive student achievement while also shaping the culture of the schools they lead. Unfortunately, many principals continuously face challenges in meeting their responsibilities to educate all students. These challenges are amplified in urban schools where high numbers of African American, English language learners, and special education students attend. Successful school principals understand that they must harness the power of collaboration by engaging their stakeholders in a way that will lead to achieving their desired results. Effective principals understand that they have autonomy and flexibility to create the conditions necessary to take their organization to the next level of performance. Principals become experts in designing systems and structures that enable their schools to accelerate their performance.

To begin to understand the practices of an effective urban school principal we must first begin to examine the various dimensions of leadership and the ways that successful leaders make a positive difference in urban schools (Payzant, 2011). There has been a long-standing debate over whether leaders are born with leadership skills or if they are learned over time. Leaders can be

defined in many different ways; and the term leadership has a myriad of definitions. Bass (1990) defined leadership as:

...an interaction between two or more members of a group that often involves a structuring or restructuring of the situation and the perceptions and expectations of the members. Leaders are agents of change-persons whose acts affect other people more than other people's acts affect them. Leadership occurs when one group member modifies the motivation or competencies of others in the group. (pg. 19-20)

Schafer (2005) followed Bass with the following definition:

Leadership is management by persuasion and inspiration, rather than direct or implied coercion. It is the ability to impress the will of the leader on those led in order to solicit obedience, respect, loyalty, and cooperation. It is a non-coercive relationship between leader and followers. (p. 231)

To strengthen the definition of leadership, one can look to Payzant (2011), who describes 17 leadership characteristics that are essential to effectively leading a diverse urban school (see Table 2). He explains that leadership characteristics can be learned and developed over time. However, he further explains that some of the effective leadership characteristics require self-reflection, continuous learning, and years of experience to fully develop. The 17 characteristics of school leaders encompass several domains and disciplines and are crucial to the overall success of urban schools.

Table 2

*Payzant's Characteristics of Effective Urban School Leaders*

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1.	Leaders must know who they are, what their strengths and weaknesses are, and how others view them.
2.	Leaders must model the behavior they expect others in the organization to model.
3.	Leaders must be thick-skinned but not insensitive.
4.	Leaders must eschew the "leader says" culture by giving permission to others to talk freely with them.
5.	Leaders must be great listeners and provide constructive feedback to acknowledge what they have heard and how they are going to use the information.
6.	Leaders must respect all of the employees in the organization regardless of their statuses or roles.
7.	Leaders must have a moral sense of right and wrong without being moralistic
8.	Leaders must build relationships that convey transparency and integrity.
9.	Leaders must distribute leadership and build high functioning teams.
10.	Leaders must embrace diversity in the workplace and provide the opportunity for all employees to increase their understanding of issues concerning gender, race, class, language, and disability to build a culture of collaboration.
11.	Leaders must convey to all that hiring the right people for the appropriate positions is the most important decision made in the organization.
12.	Leaders must have knowledge of the organization's core work to lead the improvement of teaching and learning for all students.
13.	Leaders must be clear about the distinctions between equal and equitable decisions and willing to differentiate the allocations of resources accordingly.
14.	Leaders must be transparent about the organization's accountability system, the standards for performance in the organization, and the metrics and data used to assess results.
15.	Leaders must be authentic communicators who can connect with many different audiences in a variety of venues and in good and bad times.
16.	Leaders must be forthcoming and clear when mistakes are made, take responsibility for the organization's performance, and show that steps will be taken to ensure that the mistakes will not be repeated.
17.	Leaders must have a keen sense of what should be sustained and what must be changed and improved in the organization to realize desired results.

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Payzant, T. W. (2011). *Urban school leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Leaders who possess or can develop these characteristics develop the capacity to adopt the systemic thinking and strategies to improve student achievement in all classrooms on their campus. Principal leadership has a strong influence on the organizational culture and institutional practices of schools. The leadership characteristics of the principal will either inhibit or enable the principal to shape the culture of their school. Payzant's work is particularly important because his framework was developed as a result of his work in urban school districts. This relates directly to my inquiry of how urban school principal leadership characteristics work to narrow the African American achievement gap.

Bambrick-Santoyo and Peiser (2012), as a part of a decade long study observed school leaders across the country to examine the leadership practices of successful leaders in urban settings. In their study, the researchers sought to find out the concrete actions that excellent school leaders take to make their schools exceptional. The inquiry concluded that these leaders all met two basic criteria: (1) exceptional results that exceed expectations and (2) replication of results.

The goal of all effective principals is to achieve academic success with their schools. In the work done by Bambrick-Santoyo and Peiser, the principals highlighted achieved staggering academic success. In each case their school's state test or academic placement (AP) results were top performing in the city or state. Additionally, the inquiry found that these exceptional leaders were leading schools with very challenging backgrounds. The school populations were highly

diverse with high percentages of the students qualifying for free and reduced lunch, and most were Black and Latino.

The use of robust systems and structures are integral to the development of exceptional schools. The principals analyzed in the study conducted by Bambrick-Santoyo and Peiser used systems and structures that produced extraordinary results that were replicated at multiple schools. Additionally, these principals created the conditions for the principals that followed them to achieve comparable levels of success. In other words, these principals built strategies and systems that any educational leader can apply.

Principal leadership is a key factor in supporting student achievement and closing the achievement gap. Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) conducted a study to examine how teachers experienced principal leadership and how various factors impacted classroom instructional practices. The quantitative study was conducted through a teacher survey of 4,165 participants. The researchers concluded that 3 types of instructional behaviors significantly impacted classroom instructional practice: (1) standard contemporary practice, (2) focused instruction, and (3) flexible grouping practices. The results of the inquiry showed the presence of shared leadership and the sense of a professional community helped to explain the strength between the three aforementioned variables. Wahlstrom and Louis' study concluded by explaining the importance of advancing knowledge in the area of leadership. They further explained that

leadership has an impact on instructional behavior that directly contributes to improved student achievement.

School leaders must have a solid foundation in leadership practices. The research clearly shows that principal leadership practices matter. This is even more important in challenging urban environments where leaders must balance diverse populations, tough political climates, and increasing accountability provisions. Creating leaders that are able to address the achievement gap in high poverty schools and possess a number of strong leadership characteristics enhances their ability to thrive in a challenging urban environment.

### Effective Leadership Practice

Effective principal leadership has a large impact on the culture and climate of the organization. The literature on principal leadership behavior has grown because researchers want to study the school leader's influence on organizational culture and climate. In a study of behavioral characteristics of principals, Wiggins (1972) conducted a statistical analysis to determine if a significant relationship exists between principal behavior and school climate. The analysis concluded that as principal's incumbency increased, the relationship between principal behavior and school climate also increased. This is important because as principals develop relationships on their campus over time, their actions, decisions and behaviors will impact the campus culture. The results of Wiggins study created a basis for additional research in the area of principal

behavior and school culture. More specifically, since his study, results of other studies support Wiggins' findings about the impact a principal's behavior has on the organization climate of the school (Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, & Lee, 1982; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; K. A. Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982; Rideaux, 2011).

Leithwood and Montgomery (1982) conducted an analysis of the factors that influence school effectiveness. The effective school principal comes to the forefront as an instructional or educational leader who affects school climate and student achievement (Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982). Through their work they determined that the role of the elementary principal was critical to the development of school climate as well as the instructional improvement of the school. However, their work exposed a dearth of research about how school site principals go about improving the effectiveness of their schools. More recently, the behaviors of school site principals have been linked to school climate. Kelley, Thornton, and Daugherty (2005) stressed that building effective leadership is critical to school success and linked to developing a healthy school culture.

Several studies have concluded that principals exert influence on student performance outcomes through teacher professional practice and school culture. "In essence, principals establish conditions (professional expectations, campus norms, instructional priorities, and professional development opportunities) so that teachers can focus their efforts on improving student achievement outcomes (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Muhammad (2009) explored school culture by developing a framework to understand how school

leaders can overcome staff division. After studying schools across the United States, Muhammad developed four distinct groups of educators: (1) the Believers, (2) the Fundamentalists, (3) the Tweeners, and (4) the Survivors. Skillful leaders must realize that specific strategies are employed with different groups of educators in order to maximize the transformation of school culture. When the appropriate strategies are employed and a strong healthy school culture is developed, effective school leaders can focus on key areas of instructional improvement and critical school processes such as developing the skills and knowledge of their teaching staff. The reality is that instructional leadership needs to be a shared endeavor, with principals and teachers learning and leading interdependently so that the school achieves its instructional and student learning goals (Marks & Printy, 2003).

Marks and Printy (2003) examined school leadership relations between principals and teachers. Through an analysis of 24 nationally restructured schools the researchers investigated two concepts of leadership – transformational and instructional. Functioning as leader, principals can serve to transform school cultures or to maintain them (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Louis & Firestone, 1999). Transformational leadership provides intellectual direction and aims at innovating within the organization, while empowering and supporting teachers as partners in decision-making (Conley & Goldman, 1994; Leithwood, 1994). Instructional leadership theory replaces hierarchical and procedural actions with a model of “shared instructional leadership” (Marks & Printy, 2003).



This study concluded that when transformational and shared instructional leadership exists in an integrated model of leadership, the achievement of students is substantial.

Leadership extends well beyond the principal's office and the formal titles that are evident throughout education. Spillane (2006) expands on this notion with the theory and practice of distributed leadership. Distributed leadership practice is defined specifically, as a product of the interactions of school leaders, followers, and their situation. It is further defined as a general understanding that distributed leadership refers to activities that are designed by organizational members to influence the motivation, knowledge, and practice of other organizational members in service of the core initiatives of the school. In the increasingly complex world of education the work of leadership will require diverse types of expertise flexible enough to meet new demands and challenges (Harris & Spillane, 2008). Distributed leadership can respond to the organizational redesign and system reconfigurations necessary to create schools where the collective knowledge and power of staff can be realized.

School leadership must consider the importance of school culture and organizational climate when considering how to create strategy and vision of how to improve the school. Principals must build strong systems of distributed leadership in order to develop strong relationships throughout their campus. When principals are inclusive and use the knowledge and skills of their staff they begin to shape the climate and culture of their school.

The literature on school leadership suggests that there are common characteristics that successful leaders employ in urban schools. Leadership practice in urban districts calls for a multifaceted and multidimensional approach. Successful principals must possess the ability to be an instructional leader, great collaborator, and dynamic leader that uses distributed leadership concepts as they work to reform their schools (Fullan, 1993; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood, 1994; Marzano et al., 2005).

### Theories of Educational Leadership

Educational leaders must refine and implement leadership strategies and practices on a daily basis to effectively serve the institutions they lead. To better understand the dynamics of leadership it is important to explore and understand the gap that exists between leadership theory and leadership practice. It is well documented in the research that no single trait or combination of traits has been identified that fully explains a leader's ability to bring about positive change (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Finding ways to effect change while balancing the specific needs of the organization is a daily challenge for school leaders. To give context to theories in educational leadership, the topics of transformational leadership, servant leadership, culturally responsive leadership, and leadership for social justice will be investigated.

## Transformational Leadership

Many leaders believe that the key to sustained change in their schools is to persuade colleagues to work together to achieve the organizational vision. The work by Burns (1978) laid the foundation for the theory of Transformational Leadership. In his work Burns describes the importance of leaders possessing the ability to inspire their staff to work with more energy, commitment and purpose (Burns, 1978). Bass (1998) defined transformational leadership as the process of building commitment to organizational objectives and then empowering followers to accomplish those objectives.

Bass (1990) extended on the work of Burns by analyzing the differences that exists in transformational leadership and transactional leadership. Bass sought to explain how transformational leaders impact staff motivation and performance. After synthesizing a series of surveys, Bass created the following list of transformational leadership characteristics:

- Charisma: Provides vision and sense of mission, instills pride, gains respect and trust.
- Inspiration: Communicates high expectations, uses symbols to focus efforts, expresses important purposes in simple ways.
- Intellectual Stimulation: Promotes intelligence, rationality, and careful problem solving.
- Individualized Consideration: Gives personal attention, treats each employee individually, coaches, and advises (Bass, 1990, p. 22).

Studies have shown that managers that adopt the aforementioned characteristics and behave like transformational leaders are more likely to be seen by their colleagues and employees as satisfying and effective leaders.

Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) examined how transformational leadership practices employed by school principals affected classroom instructional practices and student achievement. Surveys that were focused on the leadership practices of the principals were sent to 2,290 elementary teachers using data from England's National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies report. Leithwood and Jantzi findings concluded that leadership matters and there was a definitive gap that existed where classroom practices were changed versus classroom practices that were "lead" through the change process.

Pawar and Eastman (1997) focused on considering the contextual dynamics of organizational processes and transformational leadership. The majority of the literature has focused on the behavior of the leader and its affects on subordinates and organizations (Bass, 1990; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Conger, 1989; Tichy & Devanna, 1986), researchers, however, have acknowledged that contextual factors have significant influence on the emergence, operation, and effectiveness of transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Pawar and Eastman concluded that transformational leaders can adopt an appropriate transformational process to make it an effective vehicle for transformational tasks. The researcher further concluded that the effectiveness of a transformational leader is the result of three aspects: (1) an organization's

position on the continuum of organizational receptivity, (2) the correspondence between the transformational process required by the position and the actual transformational leadership process, and (3) the transformational leader's capacity to carry out the appropriate transformational process (Pawar & Eastman, 1997). With knowledge of these three important aspects, leaders can understand the impact of the organization's context and thus engage in the transformational process with improved effectiveness and success.

### Servant Leadership

As much as transformational leadership can impact the behavior of people in an organization, it is still a theory that focuses on the subordinates of the organization serving the needs of the leader. Researchers have questioned whether transformational leadership will develop employees and organizations ability to achieve and sustain high levels of success (Smith, Montagno, & Kuzmenko, 2004). An alternative to transformational leadership is servant leadership. Stone, Russell, & Peterson (2004) examined the similarities and differences in transformational leadership and servant leadership. The principal difference between transformational leadership and servant leadership is the focus of the leader. While transformational leaders and servant leaders both show concern for their followers, the over-riding focus of the servant leader is upon service to their followers. Conversely, the transformational leader has a greater concern for getting followers to engage in and support organizational objectives (Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004).

Greenleaf (1977) published the his essay entitled, “The Servant as Leader.” With the release of his work, Greenleaf introduced a new leadership theory. Greenleaf (1977) stated:

The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first...The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types...The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or at least not be further deprived. (p. 13-14)

Laub (1999) defined servant leadership as an understanding and practice of leadership that places the good of those led over the self-interest of the leader. He further states:

Servant leadership promotes the valuing and development of people, the building of community, the practice of authenticity, the providing of leadership for the good of those led and the sharing of power and status for the common good of each individual, the total organization, and those served by the organization. (p. 81)

The results of Laub’s study revealed that the more strongly respondents perceive that servant leadership exists in their organization the higher their level

of job satisfaction. This has major implications for organizations, which view job satisfaction (i.e. individual productivity and contribution, creativity, using individual gifts, enjoyment of the work and a sense that a person's job is important) as a critical ingredient to the success of the organization (Laub, 1999).

Taylor et al. (2007) examined principals through a qualitative study where he compared and contrasted leadership practices of principals who utilized servant leadership and those that did not. The study analyzed principals and teachers using the *Leadership Practices Inventory* to identify principals who identified themselves as servant leaders. The results showed that servant leaders rated higher with their staff than those not practicing servant leadership.

Herbst (2003) conducted a study of servant leadership and student achievement. The major finding of the study was that there were positive relationships between servant leadership and proficient student academic achievement. More specifically, the scores of principals, teachers, and school effectiveness in Broward County, Florida schools increased in the lowest 25<sup>th</sup> percentile of students in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade reading and math. Herbst (2003) declared that, "principals who embed the characteristics of servant leadership throughout their organization may expect higher level of student achievement particularly in math and reading" (p. 109).

## Leadership for Social Justice

Over the past decade an array of research literature has been compiled on the subject of social justice leadership. Much of the literature has been theoretical in nature. However, more recently a number of studies focused on the practice of social justice leadership have begun to emerge (Kose, 2007; Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Theoharis, 2007). Over time the definition of social justice has continued to evolve. Goldfarb and Grinberg (2002) offered the following definition, “social justice actively engages in reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality and fairness in social, economic, educational, and personal dimensions among other forms of relationships” (p.162).

Shoho, Merchant and Lugg (2005) proposed that the term social justice meant being fair to one’s companion. Shoho et al. attempted to create a common language for social justice. They proposed the primary tenet of social justice was leadership that is concerned with the needs of the group over the individual.

More recently, McKensie et al. (2008) defined social justice to include the goals of student achievement and critical consciousness. Additionally, the work of McKensie et al. stressed the importance of social justice leadership not only focusing on critical consciousness, but also strong instructional leadership coupled with inclusive schools structures and student support mechanisms.



Dantley and Tillman (2006) articulated a foundation for a definition of social justice by emphasizing three essential components: (1) leadership for social justice, (2) moral transformative leadership, and (3) the praxis of social justice. They concluded that employing social justice leadership praxis could mitigate social matters and social inequities. Dantley and Tillman substantiated their argument for social justice leadership by stressing, "...leadership must be critically educative; it cannot only look at the conditions in which we live, but it also must decide how to change them" (p. 17).

Theoharis (2007) followed the work of Dantley and Tillman when he defined social justice leadership theory as, "principals who advocate, lead, and keep at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically marginalizing factors in the U.S." (p. 8). Using this lens enables social justice leaders to work for equity by networking with others to rectify injustices, value human rights and individual dignity, and provide strategic professional development opportunities for staff members around the issues of class and race.

As social justice praxis continues to evolve, researchers continue to debate the terminology and definition surrounding social justice leadership. Several scholars argue against a particular definition of social justice because they see it as limiting to other traits that a social justice leader may possess (McKenzie et al., 2008; Mullen, Harris, Pryor, & Browne-Ferrigno, 2008). Although there is much debate about the definition of social justice leadership, a

universal understanding is that social justice leadership attempts to eliminate injustices and inequity in educational settings (Anyon, 2005; Larson & Murtadha, 2002). Research shows that principals who lead with a social justice mindset seek out marginalized groups in schools. It is the intent of a socially just principal to challenge the status quo and attack the systematic inequities that are deeply woven into the schooling system.

Theoharis and O'Toole (2011) conducted a study to better understand the leadership characteristics needed to create socially just schools for English language learners. They found that when principals reformed their English learner instructional program through an increased focus on human resource management a significant increase in student achievement occurred. Within the investigation, two case studies were conducted and each school site principal utilized varied approaches with success. A key element to both principals' work was the sense of responsibility and agency that drove ELL program restructuring (Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011). They also found that each principal's personal responsibility and agency (Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2008) was instrumental in giving the leaders courage and momentum to make necessary changes in staffing, pedagogy and instruction.

Brooks, Jean-Marie, Normore, and Hodgins (2007) conducted a study to explore a conceptual framework of social justice in practice. Brooks et al. investigated the use of a distributed leadership model at an urban high school in the southeastern United States. In their ethnographic study of leadership

practice, they discovered empirical links between distributed leadership practices and social justice leadership. Empirical studies in this line of inquiry support the contention that school leadership can positively influence these dynamics but significant organizational barriers exist that perpetuate inequity in schools (Gooden, 2005).

In their study Brooks et al. (2007) conducted 55 formal interviews with teachers and administrators to gain an understanding of each individual's lived experience with the school. This study revolved around the following research question: How do school leaders and followers identify, perceive, and define social justice issues in a public high school? The results of the qualitative study found that teachers, administrators and school staff practiced the concept of transformational public intellectualism. Transformational public intellectualism is defined by teachers and administrators who engage in countless impromptu exchanges about how to reach students with innovative teaching strategies and creative intellectual appeals (Brooks, Jean-Marie, Normore, & Hodgins, 2007). Transformational public intellectualism was practiced at the individual, small group, and organizational levels. As individual teachers and small groups engaged in transformational public intellectualism, new social justice strategies and programs focused on equity can develop in the school.

The combination of principal characteristics, principal practices, and leadership theory can help to explain the behaviors and habits of mind that leaders employ to meet the needs of the staff and students they lead. Effective

schools begin and end with the quality of the school leader and their leadership practices. The management structures employed by the principal will have a strong impact on the school direction and student learning outcomes. When leaders draw on theory and effective practice it goes a long way towards defining a set of the most important leadership characteristics that will contribute to positive educational outcomes for students. Principal leadership is a critical component in developing a high performing school that address complex issues such as equity and the achievement gap. However, in order to effectively navigate these challenges, it is crucial that leaders draw on theoretical perspectives as well as empirical practice to fully develop the best practices toolkit of leadership characteristics that will empower urban school leaders to transform their schools.

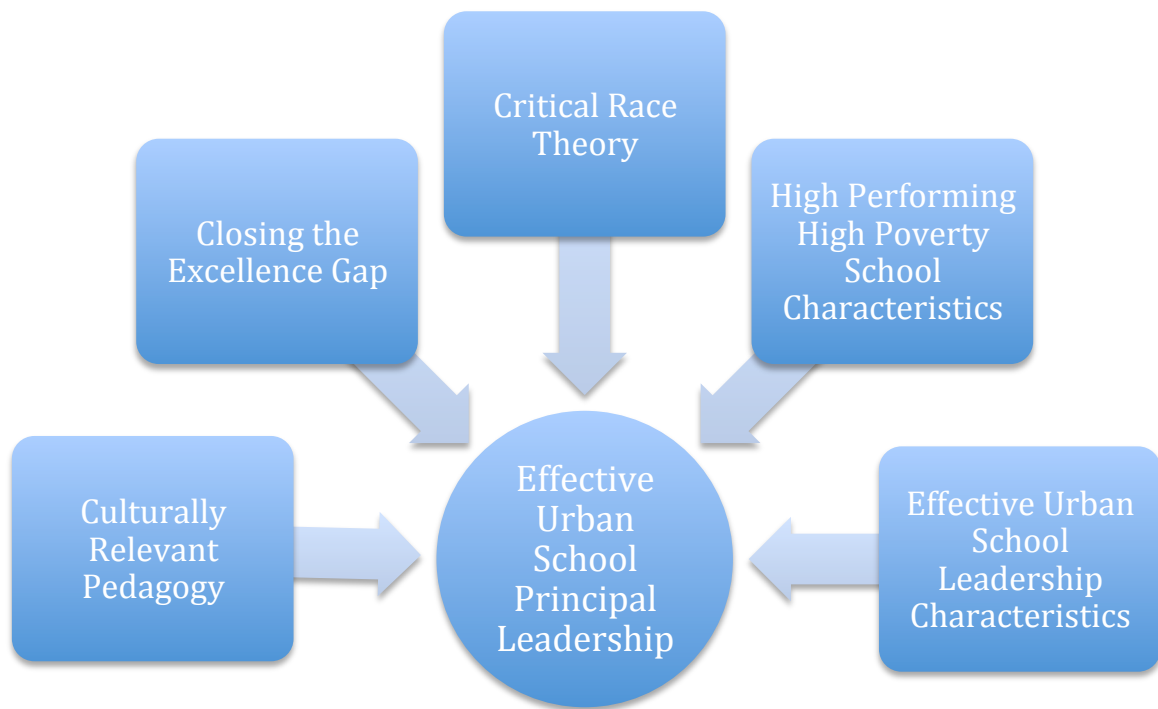
### Conceptual Framework

It is the intent of this study to focus its attention on a particular school district and the leadership principles and practices of school site principals as they work to narrow the achievement gap of African American students. A number of factors both within and outside of the school must be considered when understanding the principal's role and leadership activities that narrow the achievement gap. For this reason, the conceptual framework of this study – the systems of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that support and inform the research is a key part of the study design (Miles &

Huberman, 1994; Robson, 2011). Miles and Huberman (1994) define a conceptual framework as “a product that explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied – the key factors, concepts, or variables – and the presumed relationships among them” (p.18). The conceptual framework provides the researcher with context and “lens” through which they can understand the phenomena being studied.

### Effective Urban School Principal Leadership

Payzant (2011) stresses that the quality of instruction in the classroom and the effectiveness of leadership in schools are the most important variables that schools can influence to improve student achievement in urban schools. The context in which leaders operate influences the requisite skills, knowledge, and characteristics that the leader must possess in order to successfully lead urban schools (p.1). Principals, who function as the executive leader of their schools can serve to transform schools culture and institutional practices or they can maintain them (Louis & Firestone, 1999). In high poverty urban schools, where an achievement gap for African American students exists, leadership that is focused on creating the equitable conditions and environment necessary to narrow or close that gap is essential. To increase the academic success of African American students, an effective urban school principal leadership model is presented in Figure 1.



*Figure 1. Conceptual Framework*

### Critical Race Theory

According to Solorzano and Yosso (2000) critical race theory (CRT) in education is defined as:

A framework or set of basic perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural, cultural, and interpersonal aspects of education that maintain the marginal position and subordination of Black and Latino students. Critical Race Theory asks such questions as: What role do schools, school processes, and school

structures play in the maintenance of racial, ethnic, and gender subordination? (p.40)

Critical race theory helps to explain marginalizing practices that exist in American society. Furthermore, CRT continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in public schools. Understanding the complexities of critical race theory will equip the urban school principal with the perspective necessary to see the overt and covert issues of racism in their schools.

#### Closing the Excellence Gap

Perry, Steele and Hilliard (2003) challenged the traditional view of the achievement gap. The traditional concept of the achievement gap sets White students' performance as the norm. Hilliard instead posited that education should work to close the "Excellence Gap." This model demands that policy makers set criterion goals hold every student to high standards. Holding all students to high expectations and performance standards requires quality instructional programs and services from high quality teachers.

#### Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

One of the central reasons for the development of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) is to respond to school "settings where student alienation and hostility characterize the school experience" (Ladson-Billings, 1999). This alienation of students has an adverse affect on their ability to achieve in school. The use of CRP has assisted teachers in teaching about diversity as well as interacting with diversity found within their classrooms (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper,

2011) . School principals that support teachers' use of CRP can mitigate the effects of student alienation and create more equitable schools. As a result, the academic achievement of ethnically diverse students will improve when they are taught through their own cultural and experiential filters (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

#### High Performing High Poverty School Characteristics

Carter (2000) presented the *No Excuses Schools* framework of five common traits of high performing, high poverty schools. Numerous researchers have pointed to the effects of poverty and race as an explanation for failing urban schools. However, the *No Excuses* schools have refused to allow poverty and race to be a reason for not achieving for students. Strong leadership practices and institutional systems create the conditions for urban schools to excel. Effective and high performing schools create objectives focused on student learning, school improvement, and problem solving. High performing, high poverty schools create harmony amongst the staff about the vision and values of the school and how they will be put into practice (Kannapel & Clements, 2005).

#### Effective Urban School Leadership Characteristics

Payzant (2011) found that leaders who possess or can develop a set of 17 characteristics can build the capacity to adopt the systemic thinking and strategies to improve student achievement in all classrooms on their campus. Leadership has a strong influence on the organizational culture and institutional



practices of schools. The leadership characteristics of the principal will either inhibit or enable the principal to shape the culture of their school.

### Summary

In order to close the achievement gap for African American students, school principals must become transformative leaders that employ highly effective leadership practices in the institutions they lead. Critical race theory is present in education and effective leaders must recognize its effect and then work to mitigate its impact on staff perceptions and student performance. Student performance can be enhanced through a shift in mindset of the faculty and leadership of the schools. The achievement gap should be reframed into measuring the excellence gap that exists between current performance and the aspired performance we strive for students to attain. Principals are responsible for setting those high expectations and providing teachers with powerful tools to get the results from students. The use of culturally relevant pedagogy provides a research-based framework that is powerful for students to connect with their diverse backgrounds and authentically connect with curriculum. Lastly, looking at models of excellence is a practice that effective urban school principals should engage in frequently. High poverty high performing schools have systems and practices that allow them to achieve outstanding results with challenging student populations. Effective urban school principal leadership should incorporate the five steps identified above to dramatically improve the principal's performance

but also dramatically improve the educational conditions and performance outcomes for African American students.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

Numerous urban schools throughout the United States are underperforming and in need of reform and transformation. One of the prevailing notions that exist in explaining the underperformance of urban schools is the African American student achievement gap. The repercussions of the achievement gap will have long-lasting consequences, and leave many students with no hope for a higher education, employment, or job earnings (Lee, 2002). School principals have a strong influence on the organizational culture and institutional practices employed within their respective schools. Through their influence, principals can have a profound impact on student achievement and more specifically narrowing the achievement gap for African American students in urban public schools.

The present study aims to examine urban school principals' experience in understanding their role and impact on creating equitable schools and narrowing the achievement gap. This chapter will provide an overview of the research process and methodology used in this study. Topics covered will include Research Questions, Research Design, School District Selection, Participants, Human Subjects Consideration, Data Collection, Data Analysis, Validity, Study Limitations, and Researcher Bias.

## Research Questions

1. How do Inland Empire public school principals develop leadership strategies and practices that successfully close the achievement gap for low-income African American students?
2. What are the perceptions, experiences, and challenges of Inland Empire public school principals who are successfully closing the achievement gap for African American students?
3. In what ways does research question 1 and research question 2 help us develop equitable leaders, leadership practices, and schools that promote the success and achievement of African American students?

## Research Design

Qualitative research begins with a set of assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups associate with social or human problems (Creswell, 2012). In an effort to study the problem with more depth, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry. Maxwell (1996) states that qualitative inquiry is ideal when the intent of the research study is to “understand the meaning for participants in the study” (p.17).

Exploring meaning for the participants includes understanding their perceptions, beliefs, and lived experiences within a situation or phenomenon. Consequently, a phenomenological study design will be employed to gain a

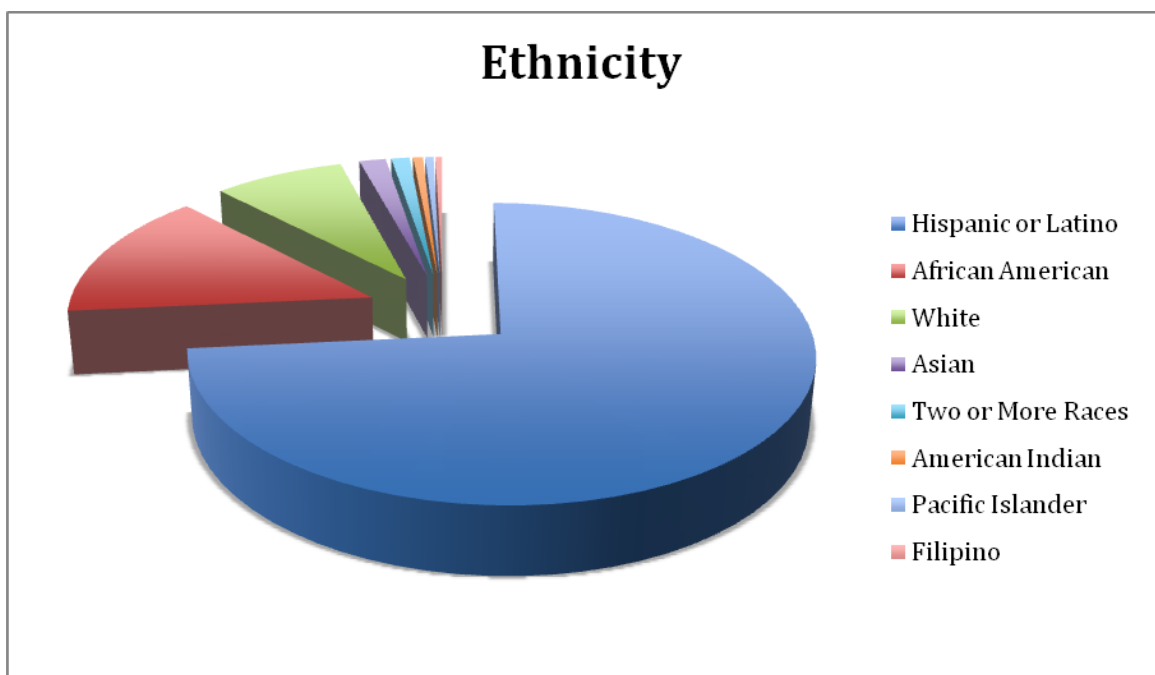
better understanding of how urban school principals' experiences and leadership practices are working to narrow the African American achievement gap. As a researcher, I want to understand how principals internalize their role, as the leader of an urban high needs school. Then I want to explore what motivates them to shape leadership behaviors and institutional practices that are working to close the achievement gap of African American students. A defining feature of phenomenology is an emphasis on a phenomenon to be explored, and that this phenomenon is phrased in terms of a single concept or idea (Creswell, 2012). In essence, I want to explore the concept of effective urban school principal leadership.

Moustakas (1994) further describes phenomenological study design through his concept of transcendental phenomenology. In this approach to phenomenology, the concept of bracketing is used to place the investigator's experiences aside in an effort to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon being studied. As such, a phenomenological study approach is most appropriate when the researcher wants to describe the common meaning of a phenomenon through the lived experiences of several individuals. Furthermore, Manen (1990) states the basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences to a description of the universal essence of the phenomenon being studied (p.177). The description consists of "what" they experienced and "how" they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994).

### School District Selection and Description

The researcher selected this district due to his employment within the district, and more specifically his employment as a school site principal. His position gave him direct access to the population of participants he studied. Additionally, the researcher was a successful student in the district of study. Due to his success as a student he now wants to explore school leadership practices in an effort to produce more successful African American students.

The school district where the study was conducted is the eighth largest school district in the state of California. The school district has a projected enrollment of approximately 54,000 students. The most recent student demographics as of May 2013 are displayed in Figure 2.



*Figure 2. Ethnic Makeup of District Students*

The African American student population of the school district represents 14.1% of the district total population. This equates to more than 7,600 African American students, the second largest population of students in the district. This number represents the third highest percentage of African American students amongst the 10 largest school districts in California and is nearly more than twice the state average for public school districts (“DataQuest,” 2014). The top ten districts with enrollment information as of 2013 are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3

*Top Ten Districts in California by Enrollment*

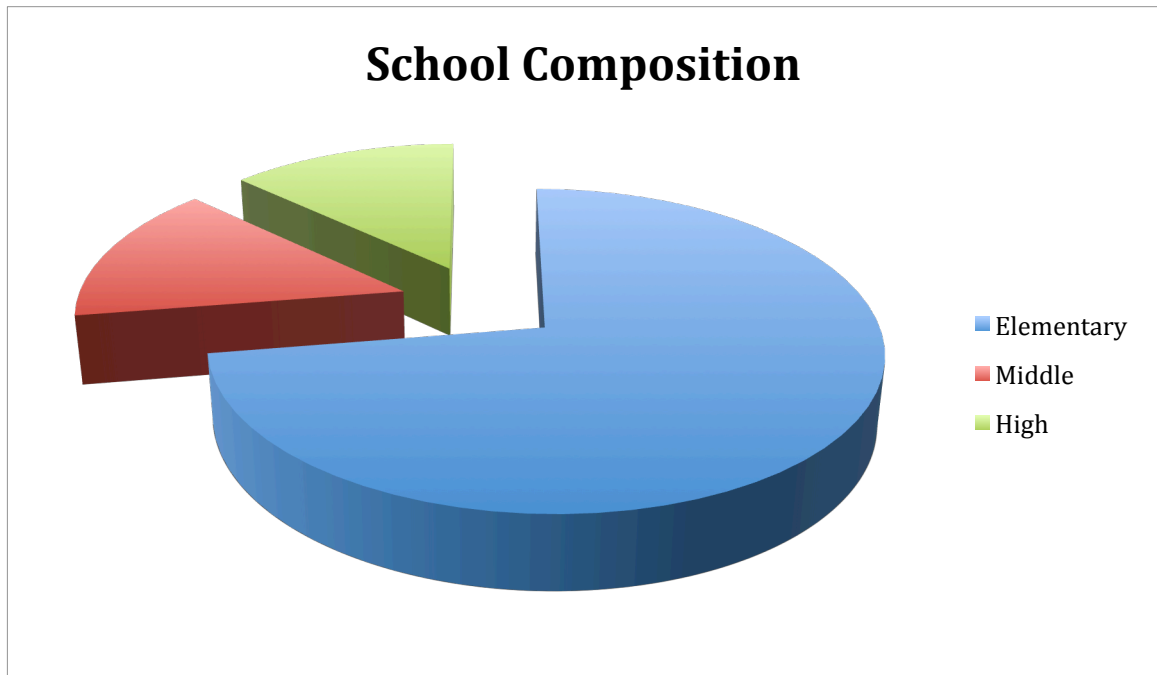
Name	Overall Enrollment	AA Enrollment (%)
Los Angeles Unified	655,494	9.4
San Diego Unified	130,270	10.2
Long Beach Unified	82,256	15.3
Fresno Unified	73,689	9.4
Elk Grove Unified	62,137	15.4
Santa Ana Unified	57,410	0.4
San Francisco Unified	56,970	9.5
San Bernardino Unified	54,102	14.2
Capistrano Unified	53,785	1.3
Corona-Norco Unified	53,437	6.3
State Total Number of AA students	394,695	6.3

An additional reason why this district was selected was because in the spring of 2014, the school district engaged in a comprehensive study of African American student achievement. This study involved a longitudinal analysis of African American student achievement and performance. The study included school site visits with staff, student interviews, and parental and community engagement activities. The aim of the study was to take a collective impact approach to understanding the performance gap that exists for African American students. This proposed study would add to that foundation of research by critically analyzing the practices and behaviors of the school principal.

### Participants

This study focused on 10 urban school principals as participants. The school district where the principals serve is a large urban school district with sixty-nine schools, serving over 54,000 students. The study examined K-12 principal leadership and had representation from the elementary and middle schools. Figure 3 shows the composition of schools in the district.





*Figure 3.* Grade Level Composition of Schools in the District.

School site principals were selected using criterion sampling. The logic of criterion sampling was to review and study all cases that met some predetermined criterion of importance (Patton, 2001). To allow for a more focused and targeted sample, principals were selected based on the criteria listed in Table 4.

Table 4

*School Site Principal Selection Criteria*

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1.	The school served 70 percent or more economically disadvantaged students, as reported for the past 3 school years.
2.	The school (if a high school) had at least 75 percent of African American students pass the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) in English language arts and mathematics.
3.	The school's (if a high school) African American sub-group met the AYP graduation rate criterion of 80 percent for the 2009-2011 school years.
4.	The average score of African American students in each of the tested grade levels was Basic ( $x \geq 300$ ) or higher on the 2012-2013 California Standards Test.
5.	The school's Adequate Yearly Progress percent proficient for the African American sub-group has grown over the last 3 school years.
6.	The principal has served as a school site principal for a minimum of 3 years.

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The focus of the criteria was to identify principals that were experiencing some level of success and using those criteria to strategically select participants. It was the researcher's intent to use the criteria to include as many principal participants as possible. The only exclusionary criterion used by the researcher was the years of experience each principal possessed. Once principals were identified using the aforementioned criteria, recruitment letters were mailed, e-mailed, and personally delivered to each prospective participant.

## Human Subjects Considerations

To begin the study process, an application to conduct research in the district was sent to the school district's research department. Once school district approval was received (Appendix A) and university IRB approval (Appendix B) was granted, the identified principals were contacted via email with an introductory letter (Appendix C), and a follow up phone call to provide them with an overview of the study and further recruit their participation in the study.

The principals who expressed an interest in participating were given an informed consent form (Appendix D). The researcher thoroughly discussed the informed consent form with each participant via face-to-face conversation. Principals who agreed to participate were given the informed consent form during the face-to-face interview session. The researcher also took the time during this interaction to thoroughly review the interview protocol prior to the interview beginning.

The participants were exposed to minimal risks, if any during the course of the study. To minimize the potential risks, the researcher maintained a time limit for the interview; limited the number of interview questions to a reasonable amount; and provided the interview protocol (Appendix E) and interview questions to the participating principal prior to the interview. Interviewing is both a research methodology and a social relationship that must be nurtured, sustained, and then ended gracefully (Dexter, 1970; Mishler, 1991). The interview was conducted in a comfortable location that was determined by the participant. The

interview took place in an environment free of distractions and interruptions; and the interview process was estimated to last approximately 45 - 90 minutes.

The study participant was asked a series of open-ended questions and their responses were digitally recorded for accuracy. The interview process consisted of the researcher listening to and digitally capturing the personal experiences of urban school site principals who are leading schools that are working to narrow the achievement gap for African American students. Listening is the most important skill in interviewing and Seidman (2012) explained the importance of listening when he stated:

Interviewers must listen on at least three levels. First, they must listen to what the participant is saying. They must concentrate on the substance to make sure that they understand it and to assess whether what they are hearing is as detailed and complete, as they would like it to be...On a second level, interviewers must listen for “inner voice,” as opposed to an outer, more public voice. An outer, or public, voice always reflects an awareness of the audience...On a third level, interviewers – like good teachers in a classroom must listen while remaining aware of the process as well as the substance. They must be conscious of time during the interview; they must be aware of how much has been covered and how much there is yet to go. Interviewers must listen hard to assess the progress of the interview and to stay alert for cues about how to move the interview forward. (p. 81-82)

Rapport is an important aspect of the qualitative interview process. The interviewing relationship must be marked by respect, interest, attention, and good manners on the part of the interviewer (Seidman, 2012). In an effort to develop rapport with the participants, the researcher remained courteous and respectful of the participant and their responses at all times. To keep the participant highly engaged in the interview, the researcher utilized active listening skills to stay connected to the interview process and guide the interview if it began to drift into an unproductive direction. To capture a high level of authentic dialogue, the researcher allowed the participants to express their thoughts in their own unique way and recorded the participants' responses verbatim.

Upon completion of the interview, the researcher provided the participants with a copy of the interview transcript to review for accuracy. Additionally, the researcher offered a copy of the completed dissertation to study participants who were interested. Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to this process as member checking. Member checking contributes to the credibility and trustworthiness of the report (Seidman, 2012). If a participant requested a copy of the report, the researcher provided, via mail or e-mail, a copy of the dissertation in its entirety.

At the completion of the participant interviews, the recorded responses were transcribed into an electronic written document, which was accessible only to the researcher. The individual responses were consolidated into open-ended response form. The researcher assigned each participant a participant number to ensure their anonymity and maintain their confidentiality. All interview notes and

transcripts will be stored in a secure location in the researcher's home and will be shredded and destroyed 3 years after the conclusion of the study.

### Data Collection Techniques

The instrumentation utilized for this study was an open ended semi-structured interview. The interview protocol utilized for this research study consisted of 15 interview questions. The use of open-ended interview questions served to understand the lived experiences of urban school principals that have developed leadership principles and institutional practices that are narrowing the achievement gap for African American students.

School and district data were used to identify school sites and principals based on the school's percentage of low SES students, African American student testing performance, and principal tenure; the specific data used was collected by the researcher from the California Department of Education "Dataquest" website.

Personal interviews were used to obtain principal responses to open ended questions. Interviews were conducted at a time that was convenient for the participating principal. In order to establish rapport with the principals, the researcher established a low stress environment with the principal by starting with small talk and using humor when and where appropriate throughout the interview. The researcher used empathy by showing his understanding of the participating principals' challenges of leading an Inland Empire urban school.

In order to conduct a thorough examination of the data collected during the study process, the researcher utilized an approach that incorporated the use of memos, descriptive field notes, and coding interview data into themes that could be analyzed. The researcher used a qualitative research methodology that was conducted in natural settings and used data in form of words rather than numbers (Maxwell, 2012). During the data collection phase of the study, the researcher utilized a notebook to write descriptive field notes, personal memos, and interview comments of study participants. After completing a participant interview, the researcher immediately transferred field notes and memos to a word processing document to capture the essence of the interview experience while it was fresh in the researcher's head. When the participant's thoughts were recorded and captured in memos, field notes, and briefs, it was possible to code and develop ideas further. Not writing or capturing thoughts in the field of research is the equivalent of having Alzheimer's disease; you may not remember your important insights when you need them (Kaplan & Maxwell, 1993). The researcher's field notes included extensive notes and details of the participant's interview session as well as important facts, data, and contextual elements of the interview setting and environment.

### Data Analysis Approach

Qualitative researchers learn by experiencing and interpreting what they have written about. The purpose of qualitative data analysis is to organize the

interviews to present a narrative that explains what happened or provide a description of the norms and values that underlie that cultural behavior (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). A systematic approach was offered by Rubin & Rubin (1995) to help efficiently execute the data analysis process. The process is noted in Table 5.

Table 5

*Rubin & Rubin Data Analysis Protocol*

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1.	Code data, and let interpretations develop, as data is analyzed response by response.
2.	Divide data into smaller categories. Reassemble the information into themes or arguments.
3.	Figure out the theoretical or policy implications of the data. What broader questions can be answered and what broader insights can be provided?
4.	Choose what themes to emphasize in part based on the audience and what they find stimulating, useful, or challenging.

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Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. (1995). *Qualitative interviewing: the art of hearing data*. Sage Publications.

The interview data collected from participants was analyzed using the NVivo 10 software. This software is a qualitative data analysis tool that allows transcribed interview data to be imported and the immediate identification of codes to be produced. After initial codes were produced the researcher used the codes to categorize the data. When codes are applied and reapplied to



qualitative data, you are codifying – a process that permits data to be “segregated, grouped, regrouped and relinked in order to consolidate meaning and explanation” (Grbich, 2007, p.21). Coding is thus a method that enables you to organize and group similarly coded data into categories or “families” because they share some characteristic – the beginning of a theme or development of a concept. The researcher used reasoning plus tacit and intuitive senses to determine what data should look and feel like when being grouped together (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Contrary to coding in quantitative research where the goal is to count the number of frequencies, the use of coding in qualitative research allows for the arrangement of data into categories, which can be compared and used to develop conceptual theories (Maxwell, 2012).

### Validity

Miles and Huberman (1994) discuss an important threat to the validity of qualitative data conclusions, researcher bias. Researcher bias becomes a threat when qualitative data conclusions are drawn from data that fits the researcher’s existing theory, goals, or preconceptions; and/or the selection of data that “stands out” to the researcher (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.263). To avoid this threat, the researcher utilized respondent validation or “member checks”. Member checks is a systematic process for soliciting feedback about your data and conclusions from the people you are studying (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This process is the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of

misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on (Maxwell, 2012). This process aided the researcher in minimizing bias during the data collection process.

### Limitations

The results of this study will not be applied to a general population as it is focused on recording the individual lived experiences of urban school principals in a specific school district. The current state of performance and high enrollment percentage of African American students makes the district selected that much more unique. However, the findings of the study may contribute to the limited body of literature on principal leadership behavior that narrows the achievement gap of African American students. Additionally, the results of the study may provide the school district and surrounding urban school districts with a set of principal leadership best practices. These best practices will assist African American and other marginalized student groups in increasing their educational performance and academic achievement.

### Researcher Bias

As an African American male principal, that works for the district where the study will be conducted, the researcher has an insider perspective of the how the district functions. Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) identified three key advantages of being an insider-researcher: (a) having a greater understanding of the culture

being studied; (b) not altering the flow of social interaction unnaturally; and (c) having an established intimacy which promotes both the telling and the judging of truth. As an insider the researcher understands the institutional norms of the district and can navigate the politics of the organization.

There are also biases that the researcher will need to consider as an insider-researcher. One bias that must be considered is the loss of objectivity. The researcher will need to consciously avoid making wrong assumptions about the research process based on the researcher's prior knowledge and experience.

The design of the study, utilized criterion-based participant selection, narrative inquiry, member checking, and detailed researcher memos. These components served to minimize researcher bias by providing the researcher several options for triangulation of data generalized to the conceptual framework described in the literature review. The researcher believes the design of the study which involved narrative interviews, principal observations, as well as member checks to verify accuracy of collected data, is sufficient to minimize the possibility of researcher bias, while at the same time, providing a comprehensive picture of the experiences of those principals participating in the study.

### Summary

This chapter discussed the design of a qualitative study examining the experiences and leadership practices of urban school principals within a large

Inland Empire school district. A description was presented of the methodology proposed that would be used to complete the research phase of the study. This process included the school district and principal participant selection, human subjects consideration, data collection process, data analysis techniques, and considerations made for researcher bias. The chapters to follow will present the findings related to the research questions and conceptual framework previously presented, as well as a thorough discussion of the findings, their implications for leadership practice and policy change, and recommendations for future research study.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE FINDINGS

#### Introduction

The goal of the chapter is to share the perspectives, experiences, and perceptions of principal leaders working to close the achievement gap for African American students in an urban, high poverty, highly diverse Inland Empire school district. A major focus of this study was to understand the lived experience of these principal leaders as they work to create equity-focused schools that effectively serve the needs of African American students. The criteria to participate in this qualitative study were that principals had to possess at least 3 years of experience as a school site principal, show growth in African American API or AYP performance, and that at least 70% of the student population had to be considered low SES. The rationale for the use of these criteria was to target principals that are leading schools that are highly diverse and highly impoverished.

The interviews with the ten principal participants took place at a time and choosing of the participants to be sensitive to their time and needs. The interview questions were carefully crafted from the conceptual framework that guides this study in order to deeply understand the experiences as well as perceptions of principals leading urban schools that are closing the achievement gap. School performance data was collected on each school within the school district to

develop criteria for school principal selection. The data, which included Low SES percentage, African American AYP percent proficient, African American CST performance, African American CAHSEE performance, graduation rate performance, and school principal tenure all supported the findings of this study.

The chapter will be divided into three main parts; the first section will focus on providing demographic information about the principal participants and their schools, using data collected from the actual participants as well as statistical information from the California Department of Education. Section two of the chapter will focus on describing the participants of the study, attempting to use their own words to describe their urban school leadership practices as well as their efforts to lead their schools towards closing the achievement gap for African American students. The final section of the chapter will discuss the emergent themes and patterns that developed across the participants of the study. The emphasis of section three of this chapter will be to focus on the lived experience of the principal participants and attempt to provide answers to the three research questions guiding this study, which again, are as follows:

1. What are the perceptions, experiences, and challenges of Inland Empire public school principals who are successfully closing the achievement gap for African American students?
2. How do Inland Empire public school principals develop leadership strategies and practices that successfully close the achievement gap for low-income African American students?

3. In what ways does research question 1 and research question 2 help us develop equitable leaders, leadership practices, and schools that promote the success and achievement of African American students.

### Part One: Group Demographics

Table 6 denotes the personal characteristics of the principals selected to participate in this qualitative study. The researcher interviewed ten principals, seven females, and three males. Three of the participants were African American, three were Caucasian, two were Latina/o, and one self-identified as Black Hispanic. The average years of service in public education for the participants was 18.5 years and the average tenure of the participants as principals was 6.8 years. All ten of the participants had completed a Master's degree, as well as two participants had completed their Doctoral degrees. The researcher attempted to gain Kindergarten – Grade 12 perspective but unfortunately, no high school principal within the participating district met the criteria. For the purposes of this research study, seven elementary principals, and three middle school principals were chosen to participate.

Table 6

*Personal Characteristics of Participants*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Gender</i>
Principal 1	Black Hispanic	Female
Principal 2	African American	Female
Principal 3	Caucasian	Male
Principal 4	African American	Male
Principal 5	Caucasian	Female
Principal 6	Caucasian	Female
Principal 7	Hispanic American	Female
Principal 8	African American	Male
Principal 9	Hispanic American	Female
Principal 10	Caucasian	Female

Education and Professional Experience

The experiences of the principal participants in this qualitative study span a wide range. The length of time the participants have worked in public education ranges from 13 years to 28 years, with the average of all participants having 18.5 years of experience in education. Six of the principals had 5 years or less of teaching experience, with the most experienced participant having 11 years of teaching experience. All of the participants possess a master's level degree and two of the participants have completed doctoral level degrees. As shown in Table 7, school administrator experience for the ten participants ranged from 8 to 23 years, with the average of all participants having 11.2 years of experience as school administrators.



Table 7

*Professional Preparation of Participants*

<b><i>Participant</i></b>	<b><i>Years in education</i></b>	<b><i>Years of teaching experience</i></b>	<b><i>Years as school administrator</i></b>	<b><i>Education</i></b>
Principal 1	13	5	8	Master's
Principal 2	14	5	9	Master's
Principal 3	25	11	8	Master's
Principal 4	18	10	8	Doctorate
Principal 5	28	5	23	Master's
Principal 6	16	4	8	Doctorate
Principal 7	19.5	3.5	16	Master's
Principal 8	16	4	12	Master's
Principal 9	14	6	8	Master's
Principal 10	22	7	12	Master's

School Characteristics

This qualitative study was conducted in a large urban comprehensive school district, located in Southern California. The principal participants within the study are leading schools that ranged from Pre-school through Grade 8. The researcher developed criteria for participation that was based on the percentage of student on free and reduced lunch as well as the school's African American student progress on API or AYP measurements. In addition, the participants had to possess a minimum of three years of experience serving as a school site principal.

All of the interview participants were serving as principals of traditional public schools in a highly diverse urban community. Table 8 displays student demographic information related to enrollment, high poverty percentages, and

the academic performance measure used to include the principal and school in the study. Student enrollment at the ten schools ranged from 401 to 911 students. The percentages of high poverty students at the ten schools ranged from 76.2% to 99.7%, with the average free and reduced lunch percentage being 94.7% for the ten participating schools. The researcher to target potential participants for the study used two academic performance measurements, the API and AYP respectively. More specifically, the researcher looked for evidence of African American performance growth on either of the two measurements.

Table 8

*School Characteristics*

<b>School</b>	<b>Years as principal</b>	<b>Student population</b>	<b>Free or reduced lunch %</b>	<b>Academic performance measurement</b>
<b>School 1</b>	3	464	99.0%	AYP Growth
<b>School 2</b>	7	573	97.8%	AYP Growth
<b>School 3</b>	5	508	76.2%	API Growth
<b>School 4</b>	5	428	99.1%	API Growth
<b>School 5</b>	16	636	98.9%	AYP Growth
<b>School 6</b>	6	616	87.2%	AYP Growth
<b>School 7</b>	9	495	97.0%	AYP Growth
<b>School 8</b>	8	401	96.3%	AYP Growth
<b>School 9</b>	4	911	99.7%	API Growth
<b>School 10</b>	5	836	95.7%	API Growth

The first section of this chapter served to give some background information about the participants and their schools. The data compiled demonstrates the diversity of the participants' chosen based on the schools they

lead, their work experience, and their gender and ethnicity respectively. All of these variables have an impact on the leadership style and practices of the participants. The duration of this chapter will be dedicated to deeply exploring each of the participants' leadership practices and perceptions when considering closing the achievement gap for African American students.

Section two of this chapter will introduce each of the ten participants and focus on using their words to explore their experiences, perceptions, and opinions. The participants will be introduced in their order of participation in the study, starting with the first interviewee. There were seven women and three men interviewed for this study, with all but one having served their entire career in the same school district. One female participant had served in two other districts prior to arriving in the district to serve as an elementary school principal. Every other study participant had at least fourteen years of experience serving within the school district.

## Part Two: Individual Participants Profiles

### Principal 1

*As a child, I was stereotyped as being African American. You can imagine a principal looking at me and thinking that I'm just a black child. I've been through the struggles of getting a quality education and being put to the side because of my skin color (Participant 1, personal communication, August, 2014).*

Participant 1 was the very first interview conducted in the course of this study. She is the only participant in the study to transfer from another district into a school site principal position. She is one of four African American participants in this study. She has over 13 years of experience in education working in three different districts. She has been principal of her current school site for 3 years and has made significant reforms during her time there.

During the interview process, Participant 1 shared very personal information about her past as a student and a single mother. She shared that her personal experiences are what drive her to be there for her students and families. When asked what pedagogical approaches work to connect with African American students she shared:

From my experience, I would say, knowing their [African American students'] background, knowing where they come from. I feel like I am connected to this community because I have a similar background. I was on welfare. I've been on WIC [Women, Infants and Children]. I was a young single mother trying to make it in life, so I can connect with the mothers (Participant 1, personal communication, August, 2014).

Because of her previous life experiences, Participant 1 feels a calling to be a principal that is available and connected to the parents of her students. She creates an environment where the mothers of the school feel welcomed and invited to be part of the school community. The researcher found Participant 1 to be an authentic and bold woman willing to share the challenges and struggles

she experienced as a single mother. It speaks to her character and ability to be a genuine role model, not only to her students but also to their parents. In the larger context of the study, it is crucial for leaders to make authentic connections and develop relationships with their students and parents. Participant 1 has an interesting story that connects her with her school community and her willingness to share her tough experiences with the researcher speaks to her authenticity as a leader in the community.

Participant 1 was appointed principal of her school at a time when the school was undergoing major reform mandates. When asked to explain her perspective and process of determining where to spend her school site budget, she shared that she used a very measured and reflective approach when making fiscal decisions. She captured it best when she stated:

I have several pieces in place to make sure the [base program] stays and we haven't been bringing in a bunch of new programs. They've [existing programs] been something that's been refined and tweaked. We just don't jump on new things. We have SWUN math and that's been because we're a SIG [School Improvement Grant] school. We're a SWUN school with the Math, so we purchase the materials they need for that. So [we focus on] giving them [teachers] what they need, not what they want, and giving them what they need to be able to execute their lessons and make sure that the kids meet mastery (Participant 1, personal communication, August, 2014).

This reflective theme was present throughout the interview with Participant 1. She reflected and shared the importance of connecting with her students and parents in the community by sharing:

We have the highest [percentage of African American students] in the elementary setting, which is about 26%...the students that attend the school, the African American students; they feel like this their home.

Parents feel safe here. I've really never had a real issue with the African American students feeling isolated (Participant 1, personal communication, August, 2014).

This point was validated when the researcher observed Participant 1 talking casually with several parents out on campus. The parents appeared very comfortable to ask questions and interact with the principal. As Participant 1 reflects about her experiences as a young single mom, she can't help but want to create a safe and nurturing place for the students and families she leads. She internalizes how important it is to create that safe feeling because it would be what she wanted for her child when she was a young single mother on public assistance. As an outside observer, the researcher is hopeful for a leader like Participant 1. She is a champion for perseverance and resiliency. She is a model for the young African American students in her school that think things are too difficult to overcome. She also is able to lead the community around her school because of her commitment to authentically relating and connecting with the people in her community. The sentiments shared by Participant 1 shows the

importance of leaders that are making genuine efforts to be a part of the community.

Although Participant 1 is African American and taking deliberate steps to support the African American students and community, she shared a strong sense of conflict when it came to being explicit about African American initiatives or programs targeted to support African American students. When asked how she would develop a school sensitive to the needs of African American students, she responded:

To be honest with you, I struggle with that every single day. One thing you can't instill in teachers is caring for students especially students that don't look like them or act like them when they come from different worlds. I guess, establishing expectations that meets [the needs of] all and not singling out a certain [ethnicity] culture or group (Participant 1, personal communication, August, 2014).

She continued her conflicted reflection when she stated:

It's very difficult to have those difficult conversations where they [teachers] don't feel like we're pinpointing one single group and trying to meet their needs. Instead, I have to make it for everyone and create strategies that can be used amongst all cultural groups (Participant 1, personal communication, August, 2014).

The internal conflict that Participant 1 is grappling with shows the inherent challenges that still exist in the education system of America. It reinforces the

argument put forth by Solorzano and Yosso (2001) regarding Critical Race Theory and the contradictory practices that exists in schools. It is further noted the deep rooted marginalization that this African American educational leader feels when she is conflicted about doing what is right in the face of opposition by the dominant white hegemony. This hegemony is what perpetuates the legitimacy of oppression in America (Unger, 1983).

Participant 1 has successfully secured grants and funding to implement innovative programming for her African American students. Her commitment to be open to creating new ways of connecting with African American students is only tempered by her continued angst about explicitly and openly creating interventions for African American students. It will be interesting to see if this leader will be able to overcome that struggle for the benefit of her students.

#### Principal 2

*I always say this about kids and it starts from kids. A kid can feel whether you genuinely are there for them or not. A parent can tell whether you're genuinely there for them or not as a leader. I look them in the eye. Even after we met, even if it's an unpleasant conversation that I have to make to a parent, I always invite them at the end of that conversation "Come see me, come. Let's walk around together. Let's look and see how we can solve this" (Participant 2, personal communication, August, 2014).*

Participant 2 has spent her entire career within the district. Prior to her appointment as a school site principal, she served as an elementary teacher,



instructional coach, and vice principal. She has served as principal of two different elementary schools and has experienced success with African American students in both schools. She proudly shared her success when she stated:

I have very high expectations, high expectations here and high expectations at my previous site. While at my previous site, I closed the achievement gap for African American students and here my African American subgroup is the highest performing group on campus and it's because of high expectations (Participant 2, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 2 makes it very clear that high expectations are foundational to her leadership practice. In her experience, she directly attributes her success closing the achievement gap to having high expectations for students and staff. As a researcher, high expectations have been a constant theme that has been presented by nearly every participant in this study. This strongly aligns with the literature on high performing high poverty schools. The establishment of expectations is a core leadership function and Participant 2 validates that assertion with her comments. The construct of high expectations is seminal to this research study and has been identified as an important construct in the study findings. This adds to the development and understanding of effective urban school principal leadership.

Participant 2 feels that she has achieved her success at the two schools by a commitment to creating a caring environment for students and their families.

One of the first steps she has taken at both schools to create a caring culture is to craft a caring vision and mission. She had the unique experience of being a classroom teacher at her current site and thus was even more focused and committed to the work of creating excellence at her school. She describes the process at her current school by sharing:

I knew a part of my charge here was number one; I had [to have] a mission to show that we could do it here. It doesn't matter where you come from because I experienced it as a teacher here. I had to bring that vision here to the school, explain to our teachers that we will have high expectations. We don't have excuses (Participant 2, personal communication, August, 2014).

She went on to share because of her previous experiences in the school she understood the dynamic challenges that exist in the community. She reflects:

Well, part of my mission when I came here because I had taught here previously I knew the area. I knew the populations. I knew what was going on here. It was before our neighboring school was even built. The area right behind where our neighboring school actually stands right now, they called that Little Africa. Many of our families felt disconnected, gone through a lot of ... They had shootings back there, gone through a lot in the community. I knew coming back some of the challenges in the history because even though maybe people have moved and evolved, things

don't leave a community. Those things remain. People remember those things (Participant 2, personal communication, August, 2014).

It is clear that Participant 2 believes that the key to her school's success will be the teachers' ability to raise their expectations for the students and community. The community where Participant 2's school is located is one of the poorest and historically most crime-ridden areas of the city. With all of that history, Participant 2 has an unwavering belief that her school will achieve. She feels this way because of her history within the community and the school as a teacher. The researcher felt that her previous experiences as a teacher at her school gave her a distinctive point of leverage as the principal. She knows what her teachers are experiencing but more importantly she knows what the community has experienced over the years and how to communicate and connect with the community stakeholders.

Participant 2 has an engaged leadership style that fits well in her community. She clearly communicates her vision not only to her teachers but also to the community. This creates an engaged school staff as well as an engaged community, that if unified can do great things for African American students.

Participant 2 has used her previous experience as a district teacher and principal to create an organizational culture that is caring for students and rooted in doing what's right. She knows from experience how important creating a relationship with students is to closing the achievement gap. She relies on her

teaching experience in high poverty schools to assist her in stressing the need for creating caring environments in her school and more importantly being direct with employees when they don't meet the expectation. This was exemplified by her when she discussed a courageous conversation she had with a teacher regarding the teacher's disciplining of a student. She shared:

I use straight talk... I had a new teacher the other day and there's a student [in her class] who's a kinder. He's African-American and he has a problem. He started to hit kids...the teacher, brand new, thought it was appropriate to isolate him in the corner (Participant 2, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 2 went on to say to the new teacher:

"When he's isolated, he's by himself and then he's also facing a wall.." I had to have that straight talk with her to explain that [it] may not be your intention but you've isolated him and he's looking at a wall. That just culturally [speaking], it doesn't mix. A lot of times our teachers, they're not trying to be [exclusionary]. They're just not sensitive to the needs [of our diverse students]. I'd be wrong if I didn't say it (Participant 2, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 2 understands the power of straight talk and high expectations for students and staff. She is explicit about creating the conditions in her school for students to thrive in an environment that is rigorous and supportive for students. She realizes that the district has provided many

opportunities for the teachers and staff to become aware of culturally relevant pedagogy and other methods of engaging diverse learning groups. She shared, “We’ve gone through a lot here in the district. We’ve been through culturally relevant teaching. We’ve been through a lot of those trainings” (Participant 2, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 2 then began to share what she thought was a major hindrance to her ability to fully transform her school community. She captured her concerns when she stated:

The real question is not whether they’re aware. The question becomes do they [teachers and other faculty] care. That’s a whole different question. That’s a whole different set of circumstances and that’s why I do straight talk. There’s a difference if you don’t know [what’s best for students] versus if you do know [what’s best for students] and you just don’t care. If you’re that person that knows and doesn’t care, you don’t need to be here. [And] It’s my job to help you find something else (Participant 2, personal communication, August, 2014).

This strong stance by Participant 2 shows her commitment to her students. She constantly works to create an organizational culture that is shaping the belief systems and mindset of her staff and community. Conversely, she understands that it is difficult for leaders in schools to completely change the way people view the world. As a fellow school principal, the researcher can directly relate to the feelings Participant 2 expressed about having a teacher who doesn’t

care about kids and deficit mindset about African American students. This is a crucial topic within the larger context of the current study. Creating caring environments for students and staff is a direct result of the leadership priorities established by the principal and then the constant reaffirming of the expectation. Additionally, it is important that the principal continuously model and monitor the expected behavior for all the people we lead. This modeling for people allows the principal to offer constant feedback and engage in “straight talk” with employees around changing peoples’ mindset. This model is extremely difficult in practice; Participant 2 explained the difficulty with the following statement:

If it’s not in here, in your heart, then you’re not able to do it. I can’t teach somebody to care. I can’t teach somebody to really love what they do. You have to want it. It just comes from your heart. I can’t change that sometimes. [And in reality] forming genuine relationships with the kids...it’s hard for some people to do that (Participant 2, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 2 recognizes the need for effective pedagogy to be used with African American students to continue to produce excellent outcomes. However, she also recognizes that to truly address the “Excellence Gap” that exist for African American students the expectations for everyone in the school must be lifted. She also believes that the low expectations mindset must be eliminated to truly pursue closing the excellence gap. She laments:

It's the mindset; it's the mindset of the people. You can have all kinds of research. You can research, you can send out a taskforce. You can look back research wise and historically... Sometimes you can't change the mindset of the people... [It's the] elephant in the room and people don't want to address it and it's an uncomfortable conversation (Participant 2, personal communication, August, 2014).

However, Participant 2 realizes the key to moving forward and closing the excellence gap will be the teaching learning paradigm and her leadership practice. Hilliard and Sizemore (1984) note that the real gap for African American's typical performance and the levels of excellence are well within reach for students. The challenge for teachers and school leaders is ensuring excellent teaching and learning opportunities for students every single day. Participant 2 sees the fundamental responsibility of this process being hers to own. She explains:

Any [high] performing school starts with the leader. The leader drives everything at that school. You then have to have a staff that exhibits those qualities of knowing and understanding what high performance is, how do they achieve it, how do they get their kids to that point. There are no excuses. I don't care if a kid comes in to you not reading. Let's say they [students] come in 2nd grade [and] they only know 5 words. What are you going to do now? You can't go back. What is your goal for them by the end of this year? That's the attitude and we don't make excuses. We don't

blame. We go forward (Participant 2, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 2 has had success with African American students in two different schools. This demonstrates that she engages in effective leadership practices. Additionally, her leadership style of being visible, engaging parents and focusing on building high expectations creates an organizational culture where African American students can thrive. As Participant 2 focuses on developing a highly caring school environment, she must continue to engage any staff members not tightly aligned to her vision. She is a strong leader that can have the tough conversation at a moments notice but also be nurturing and supportive of employees.

### Principal 3

*By getting to know the people first...Know what their strengths are. Just like any classroom, kids have strengths and challenges. Staff, the same thing, they are all people and I use a mantra that I learned from my dad, "It's always about the people. If you respect and work with the people, then you are going to be very successful (Participant 3, personal communication, August, 2014).*

Participant 3 has spent his entire career as a member of the school district. Twenty-six years ago he began as a substitute teacher and worked his way into a certificated teaching position. When asked what attracted him to education, he had a very interesting experience and response:



My 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers... My 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher ... I was not the kid who sat at the desk with their hands folded on the desktop and waiting quietly for the next directions. I had my own program and I was willing to run it even at that age. My 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher had fallen somewhere during the year and would come by to redirect my attention, would crack me on the head with her cast. I thought, "This is not right." and so I took a year's worth of thumps on the head, not being that child that fit the mold. 5<sup>th</sup> grade, I got the exact same personality, different person. Two years of back to back, you need to sit down and be quiet and back then they had what they called enrichment. I'd been identified as a student to go to enrichment classes, which is our "Gate" nowadays...but at the time, those differences for Gate kids was not nearly as recognized so my differences didn't match up well with those two years of teachers. By the end of 5<sup>th</sup> grade, I was really done with school. I thought if this is way it's always going to be. I'm going to just not fit in... Then, I got a 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher who have matched up well with, understood why I did bring to the classroom and nurtured me. My 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher inspired me to say, "Hey, education can be a lot of fun, and very engaging and you can learn some stuff." That was such a difference between 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade, so education was rescued for me in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. I always thought, "I want to be a 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher when I grow up." That was it (Participant 3, personal communication, August, 2014).

As a result of his childhood experience Participant 3 knew from very early on the power that educators have over shaping the perceptions and perspectives of the children in their school. His early experiences nearly drove him away from education, but the power of a positive relationship with a different teacher completely changed his trajectory in life. Participant 3 recognized the impact of the teacher student relationship and now leads his school with a keen eye on how the teacher student relationship is fostered and nurtured by the teachers he leads. When speaking with Participant 3 and observing his demeanor and interactions with staff and students, it is very evident that he is all about building relationships and nurturing the staff and students of his school. When looking at the bigger picture of this research study, it reinforces the concept of adults having the responsibility to create a caring and nurturing environment for students so that students who come from diverse backgrounds can thrive in an academic setting.

Participant 3 believes strongly in knowing and understanding the strengths of the people he leads. He stated, “My first job is getting to know what are the strengths of my staff and then developing ways to support them” (Participant 3, personal communication, August, 2014). He then uses this belief to assist him in having the critical conversations about strengths and areas of development with his staff. These conversations also allow Participant 3 to establish clear expectations for his teachers. He expressed this as follows:

Knowing the individuals on campus, and talking with them as individuals. I'm challenging them, "Step up," so the opportunities for growth are easier to see because people show that off. [So] when you're in their classrooms and when you see what they're doing, you see, "Oh, this teacher is relentless about giving kids feedback." Then you get to see that's something they're doing well, [and so] celebrating that and letting them know that I as their principal, I am here to support that... The challenges are a little more difficult. Some people recognize their challenges and their weaknesses and so they do a better job of guarding that, protecting it and not showing it. It's true; because that's in all of us we don't want the flaw in us to be exposed, so we protect that a little bit. Then the other side of that is we get them to recognize and try to get comfortable with that shortcoming or weakness, that opportunity for growth and say it just like that, "Hey, I want to give you some feedback on this. It's a challenge. How do you see us working with this?" Respecting that person but saying this is a challenge. We got to step up here. I'm here to support them...and there have been opportunities where I have to sit at this very table, and say to somebody, "You have to change this because ..." I'd say the reasons why and that's not comfortable as a principal but it's what they pay us to do on those occasions, to say, "We got to fix this because your own kids or there are parents that are recognizing this. We need to do better so that those

kids get what they need.” (Participant 3, personal communication, August, 2014)

Participant 3 has internalized the importance of balancing a supportive temperament with the need to establish very clear expectations for what will be acceptable performance from his staff. This gives his employees clear guidance on what they will need to do to be successful within the organizational culture. When reviewing the entire interview transcript for Participant 3, the researcher got a clear picture of his practice and position as a school site leader. The researcher believes that he prides himself on building relationships through honest communication that is based on building peoples’ strengths while keeping a keen eye on areas where employees need support. Participant 3 has a leadership mentality and practice that fits the high performing high poverty school framework. Kannapel and Clements (2005) share the importance of creating environments built upon trust, strong communication and a clarified vision about the direction of the school. This is exactly the environment Participant 3 is creating in his school.

Participant 3 has a heart for his African American students and works to create a thriving environment for his students. He has been successful in continuing a tradition of excellence at his school while being sensitive to the perception of other principals that believe that he is “at the jewel” of the district. He staunchly supports his school and the diversity they achieve through being a district magnet school. He feels that his school is sensitive to the needs of

African American students because they focus on creating a warming and caring environment for students. Participant 3 feels that nurturing a caring environment is crucial when you receive students from every corner of the city. This is even more important when you have students coming from different neighborhoods and different social strata. Participant 3 shared, “All children need the same thing. They need to know they’re in a warm welcoming environment” (Participant 3, personal communication, August, 2014). Participant 3 is committed to creating the best environment for all of his students.

#### Principal 4

*You can’t give the African American achievement gap lip service. That’s why you hear me keep going back to English Learners. They don’t have just have lip service. They have plans. They have monies. They have funds allocated...They have plans to target English proficiency and raising academic achievement, but we have yet to see a strong plan to do the same for African American students* (Participant 4, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 4 is another participant that has spent his entire professional career in the district. He has more than 18 years of education experience working in inner city schools. He has served as a school site principal for the last 5 years at two very different elementary schools. His first school site was in a much more affluent portion of the city and had a large subgroup of Caucasian students. His second site is a stark contrast to the first, serving a large percentage of

impoverished African American and Hispanic students. Being an African American male principal, Participant 4 reflected on his experiences leading each of the schools and the community the schools existed within. He reflected on site 1 when he shared:

When they first name me as the principal... I was like, "Okay. I'm going to an area where you have a sub group of White, more affluent students." I had never worked in that type of setting as far as being a teacher or an administrator. I've always worked in low socioeconomic urban settings with predominantly Hispanic and African American students (Participant 4, personal communication, August, 2014).

Contrast Participant 4 comments on his initial experience as the principal of his second school site:

Some of the first things I did were to have meetings like "moms and muffins", trying to establish an English Language Advisory Council (ELAC), but making sure I'm very visible and out shaking hands and talking to parents because number one, I'm African American male. I don't speak Spanish at all. Sometimes there could be a wall of miss ... I don't know what to call it. There can be a wall of separation between just how they view me and what it is I'm trying to convey to them or how I'm trying to lead over here (Participant 4, personal communication, August, 2014).

In both instances Participant 4 had to deal with the dynamics of being a Black man and needing to have the parents and community he was serving

understand him and his motives. Throughout his interview, Participant 4 stressed the importance of how he is portrayed as a leader. As an African American male school principal, the researcher keenly understands the challenge Participant 4 experienced. As an African American male, there is a need to prove ourselves to people. I believe this is a deep-seated need to be accepted that stems from a history of structural inequities that have historically marginalized African American people (Rodriguez, 2014). This belief drives successful African American people to still prove themselves even when not necessary.

Participant 4 was the longest interview of all the study participants. His interview was filled with his views on the importance of leadership when serving as a school principal. He shared his framework of a model school when he stated:

You have your educators, your scholars, and your parent community. You all have to be working together towards a common purpose but you cannot do that if you don't listen to what they need and if you're not constantly talking about that vision and trying to make it come to fruition. That means consistently revisiting it, getting feedback on it, where are we, and you've got to take the good feedback with the not-so-good feedback (Participant 4, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 4 has internalized this model and has adopted it as his system for building an excellent school. He understands there is a mutual relationship between all three groups and that the groups must work together in order to

achieve the maximum learning for students. As a fellow principal, the researcher completely agrees with the concept of how the three groups must inter-relate in order to achieve success as a school. However, the researcher had not constructed the three groups into a conceptual framework with the detail and intricacies of Participant 4. This level of detail and analysis is very indicative of Participant 4's behavior and leadership style. He uses this level of detail throughout the interview.

When asked about the African American achievement gap, Participant 4 began to share some very candid thoughts and feelings. He feels strongly that in order to close the achievement gap a serious commitment has to be made by the leaders of our districts, state, and federal government. During the interview he posed the following questions, "What systems do we have in place statewide, district-wide, nationwide for tracking, monitoring, and then planning for the success of African American students? What systems do we have in place to continuously assess their learning?" (Participant 4, personal communication, August, 2014)

This is a poignant question posed by Participant 4. The researcher sensed the tone of the interview change when Participant 4 began to discuss the issues surrounding the achievement gap. When he asked the aforementioned questions, he did so in a way that one could tell he has been asking these questions for a long time but has failed to receive answers. However, Participant 4 has a series of recommendations for closing the achievement that he shared:



For example, for our English learners, we're constantly monitoring their English language performance and setting goals to meet our yearly targets for our English learners. What I think is needed is a similar monitoring system for our African American students. It may only be once or twice a year that we assess their progress or assess their learning. Then once that information is known, we have to set targets for that particular subgroup of scholars, subgroup of students, and that this data is revisited by the district. The districts are held accountable at the state level just like for English learners. If our English learners aren't growing, then the district faces ... I don't want to call them "sanctions" but they can be scrutinized and maybe even have their funds subjected to being limited, I have to say, because they're not meeting their federal or their state target. Systematically, there has to be some kind of assessment that we use to target the academic progress of our African American scholars (Participant 4, personal communication, August, 2014).

It is clear that Participant 4 has thought extensively about this topic and the passion in his voice elucidates the importance to him of finding solutions for the achievement gap. As an African American male principal, and father of school aged children, Participant 4 is looking at the achievement gap as something he wants to address for his school but he is also looking for global institutional changes so that African American students everywhere can have opportunities. As a father with school aged children, the researcher also wants

to see more deliberate action being taken by districts and education leaders to create systems and structures that will address the needs of African American students. The researcher believes there are still some large institutional barriers being placed in front of African American students that perpetuate the achievement gap. The lack of effective pedagogical practices, lack of effective monitoring systems, and failure to commit the necessary financial and personnel resources continue to impede the progress of African American students. The structural inequities that exist in schools need to be addressed. In the context of this study, Participant 4 and the researcher have touched on issues of social justice leadership. As principal leaders, we must eradicate the inequities that exist in the schools we lead. Dantley and Tillman (2006) stress the importance of social justice leadership beginning with the school site principal closely monitoring issues of equity, race, and gender. Participant 4 and the researcher are in many ways challenging the status quo but the history of oppression and marginalization of African Americans is still prevalent in the schools we lead today.

Participant 4 is working hard to create an excellent school for all of his students. Although, he has experienced success at both schools he's led he possesses this internal drive to continue to push for student success. To meet the needs of his students, Participant 4 has established a culture of collaboration within his school's faculty. He drives the concepts of relationships and caring into

his staff constantly in an effort to build the behaviors and mindsets that will focus on meeting his students' needs. When speaking of the culture he shared this:

What's working here at this particular school...[we have a] culture of collaboration that [we] care for all of our students here. Whether you have a Black scholar in your room, whether you have a Hispanic, whether you have a White, they're all our scholars and we will treat them as such. That's number one. If we can't care about the kids that we work with, there's no way we can educate them properly. We talk about building relationships here. We talk about how do we connect with our scholars more. One of our norms is that we will find ways to connect with our diverse scholars here. We highlight our kids during professional development. We talk about them on the PA system. It's a culture of collaboration and caring here...that's the beginning of properly educating our African American students. It starts with the caring. It starts with the building of a culture that values all kids, man! If you don't have that, you aren't closing any achievement gap. You might as well check out and go home (Participant 4, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 4 is passionate about meeting the needs of his students. He is outspoken about the need to revamp the institutional supports for African American students. He wants action plans developed and task forces created to build the capacity for African American students to excel. His courageous leadership and willingness to build systems shows his commitment to African

American student. I believe that because Participant 4 sees himself in the faces of his African American students, he will continue to advocate loudly for more overt systemic support for African American students.

#### Principal 5

*You have to know where the kids are coming from. If we are talking about African American kids, if you go into Alta Loma and those kids and those kids may not be living in an environment where there's gunshots every night and there's domestic violence they are watching. It's possible but that may not be the norm... but that is the norm here* (Participant 5, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 5 has spent the last 28 years of her life serving the students and families of the district. She has over 15 years of experience as a school site principal and has served as principal at multiple school sites. Her school is in one of the most challenging areas of the city. It is impoverished, there are numerous incidents of violence, and the school is seen as a place where the community can come for support and assistance. Due to the high mobility of the students in the school, Participant 5 has adapted her instructional program to be responsive to the needs of her students. She speaks about her adaptive program as follows:

The main thing with the high mobility that we do here, and I think why we have success is, these kids come in and there are a lot of them who are only here for a short time. They are here for three months. It's usually an eviction cycle...like a three-month cycle, so we get them in, in like the first

week, and we do all the assessments. The teachers know they only have five days to get all their assessments in line... and then we have everything set up [in a] structure where the kids are switching, like the third grade switches from nine to 10 for an hour and everything is [done by ability]... All the kids are leveled and they are reading and they are getting differentiation for an hour a day, so everything is differentiated (Participant 5, personal communication, August, 2014).

This is a very time consuming and intensive process that Participant 5 and her staff has undertaken. She admits that she understands that the students may not be enrolled for a long period due to the historical high mobility of the school. Yet, she is still compelled to structure the program to be responsive to the needs of the students. With an African American student population of more than 30%, this overt action by the principal gives the African American students that are struggling targeted support and instruction that will meet their needs. The researcher found it promising that these actions are taken by Participant 5. In most cases, it would be much easier to ignore the challenges of mobility and move forward with a standard instructional program. However, Participant 5 is more concerned with meeting the needs of the students and parents of her community. This action speaks to her commitment to meet the needs of African American students.

When working with the community Participant 5 is willing to explore all options in the best interest of her students. She looks for opportunities to provide

enrichment and engagement within the school and in structured ways outside of the school. She is currently working with her supervising Assistant Superintendent to partner with an outside agency on a grant to support the needs of African American students. Participant 5 discussed a grant that the school received specifically to support the African American students with wrap around services. She described the program below:

It's a \$700,000 grant and they work [with 3 elementary schools in our district]. They have a therapist, a person that's not a credential counselor but is [basically] a counselor on campus along with the other counselor. She's working with high needs students and their families. It's supposed to be family-oriented and these are families that, for some reason, are turned off with the school system or having struggles and they help them get their rent, those kind of things so, that, and then they do a program two times a week after school and hook it with my CAPS. My African-American students, a lot of them are hooked up, especially the boys, are hooked up with [the grant program]. They take them to the movies, they take them to theatre in Rancho Cucamonga. They do a lot of things for them. They just started in the middle of the year last year and so now ... It's really the beginning right now because they were just getting their feet wet (Participant 5, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 5 understands the importance of the classroom instructional program as well as the importance of full wrap around support services to the

impoverished families of her school. This is another example of Participant 5's awareness of her students' needs and her willingness to take action to support her school community. She shared her openness to the program concept by saying, "[The Assistant Superintendent] works closely with me...and so when this came across his desk, I said, we'll try anything" (Participant 5, personal communication, August, 2014).

This is indicative of Participant 5's willingness to adopt any program she thinks will help her students and families be successful. The researcher believes this speaks to her leadership style. She is willing to take risk. She is willing to explore and be innovative about solutions for her students. She has seen excellent student achievement results for her African American students due to her willingness to think outside the box and be creative about solutions for her students. This is an example of good leadership that should be modeled across the district.

Participant 5 has an interesting style of how she is leading her staff towards being responsive and supportive of the needs of African American students. She has vast experience as a school site principal that she has developed over her 15 years as a school site principal. She explained her unique way of coaching her teachers towards effective instructional strategies for African American students when she shared:

The way I'm doing things is not the way we did it when I came in. When I usually go into school, I do it through the back door, I call it. I don't do it; I

hope somebody else does because it's positive and they'll go ...They were like, "Oh my God, did the principal send you in here?" They're like, "Well, we're just here supporting all the first grade team in this practice." Do you know what I'm saying (Participant 5, personal communication, August, 2014)?

Participant 5 recognizes the power of peer influence and peer pressure and uses it to change behavior and teacher practice on her campus. As leaders, we must be strategic about how we redirect teachers when they are not meeting our expectations. Participant 5's collaborative leadership style is an effective strategy for moving her teaching staff towards the vision and goals of her school. Participant 5 continues her unique style of leading and growing her teachers when she shared the following:

Now, since most of them taught with me for a while and a lot of them, in two schools or three, I put out positive emails all the time. "Here's the best practice that I saw today." Sometimes it's not even the best practice that I saw that day. Do you see what I'm saying? Sometimes it's the best practice that I wanted to see and didn't see that day. You'll see it the next day when you go to them because they've read the email and they're like, "Oh, I didn't do that" (Participant 5, personal communication, August, 2014).

These leadership practices that Participant 5 employs comes from her nearly 29 years of education experience. She has found ways to be resourceful



to get the absolute best out of her teachers. She mentions that some of her teachers have been with her in two or even three schools. This speaks to her leadership qualities and effectiveness with teachers. The researcher views this positively when considering the needs of African American students. Participant 5 has clearly shown that her experience and practical understanding equips her well to coach her staff to meet the needs of African American students. We need principal leaders like Participant 5. Leaders that will do whatever's necessary to get the best out of their teachers and provide an environment where African American students can be successful.

Participant 5 has translated her experience and unique leadership style into success as a principal of some of the district's most challenging schools. More specifically, she has been successful with African American students due to her understanding of the neighborhood dynamics, coupled with the need for supportive programs, and responsive leadership practices. For example, she stated:

Not everything can be dramatic. Not everything can be traumatic. Not everything can be at a high level of intensity because that will be all day everyday. Teachers, when they come in here, that maybe haven't worked with us and they'll say, "Oh, the student had a knife." I'll go, "All right. I'll take the student. Keep teaching." Oh, we have a lockdown ... Keep teaching. Oh my god the lights are out!!! Keep teaching. Do you see what

I'm saying? It has to all stay on a level (Participant 5, personal communication, August, 2014).

This quote exemplifies the leadership style of Participant 5. She remains calm, cool, and collected regardless of the situation. Participant 5 recognizes the need to process the full context of every situation that is presented to her fairly and equitably. Her extensive history in the school district and ability to serve effectively in highly impoverished communities gives her the right mindset to process information and think about the greater good when dealing with sensitive issues within her school. This is what it takes to build a safe and orderly environment that for African American students.

#### Principal 6

*Having this caring environment where continuously improving, building character, and overall those things is this is a place you want to be. Not just for our students. This is where our teachers want to be. This is where our staff wants to be. This is where parents want to be. The only way to be that is to be that every day. Make it a place you want to be. Make it a place where the kids want to be* (Participant 6, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 6 has been in education for 15 years and has spent the last 5 years as principal of a one of the district's magnet schools. As a magnet school principal, the school's achievement data far outperforms some of the other participating principals. When considering that the low socioeconomic student

percentage has grown from 74% to 95% during Participant 6's tenure, a compelling reason to understand Participant 6's leadership practices and beliefs when it comes to African American students is presented.

Participant 6 is a strong advocate for systems and structures that drive her leadership of the school. She couples this focus on systems with a drive for continuous improvement of her school. The focus on systems was evident very early on in the participant's interview. One example is as follows:

As simplistic as this sounds, I think that it starts off with being very well organized. The day itself is organized. Teachers have their lessons and instruction organized for students. The day itself is well structured and well thought out. There's systems in place is basically what it comes down to. Within those systems, there's a focus on students, best outcomes for students (Participant 6, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 6 focuses her leadership practices around being structured and systematic. This mindset is derived from her quantitative research background. Participant 6 is one of two study participants that have achieved a doctoral degree in education. She is highly analytical in her approach to leadership and driven by a constant drive to improve. This is evidenced in the following statement:

Also, within that, a constant looking at what can we do to make this better? Yes, this was good, but if we just tweaked this much, it would be even better. It's become part of our culture. We have a back-to-school

night. We debrief- People come and say, if we just tweaked this a little bit more. Just making it better every year. That goes for events, concerts, and academic classes. The teacher teaches a lesson. Next year, I've got my notes, even if it's just on a Post-It note. This is what I'm going to do next year to make this even better. It's a constant looking at dissatisfaction with good enough (Participant 6, personal communication, August, 2014).

In her statement, Participant 6 states the constant drive for improvement has, "become a part of our culture." This is the case because of Participant 6's driven focus of creating that culture. Participant 6 knows that a focus on systems will push her staff and students to the next level. She admittedly states because higher performing students attend the school, achievement needs to be pursued through the deliberate actions of her and the staff. The staff has to be coached in this because of their belief that they are "doing well enough." This was captured by Participant 6 when she said, "I would say the first two years I was here, there was a reaction of the staff saying, we are successful. Why are you dissatisfied with our success" (Participant 6, personal communication, August, 2014)?

Participant 6 isn't dissatisfied with her staff's success; she just has an insatiable desire to get better. As a school leader, the researcher agrees with this perspective. African American students need driven leaders to support their needs and advocate for their success in the face of complacency. To build a high performing school that is sensitive to African American students' needs, principals like Participant 6 are essential.

Participant 6's reliance on systems also extends to how she is leading the students of her school as well. She has built a code of conduct framework that all of the students are responsible for knowing and following while attending her school. She is very explicit in working with students to accept and incorporate the tenets of the code of conduct. She states:

We have our code of conduct, which is ROAR. It's respect, ownership, attitude, and responsibility. When it initially came about, students helped us generate that. Every student on campus- We started it the year before we implemented it and had our sixth and seventh graders help us determine what would go into the code of conduct and what made sense. Then the next year we implemented. At that point, the sixth and seventh graders became seventh and eighth graders, so two-thirds of our school already knew the code of conduct, had buy-in into it because they helped develop it (Participant 6, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 6 believes in having structures and systems for the students but she also sees the power in having students involved in school wide decisions. She accomplished this by having the students develop the framework and using the students again to train new students as they arrive at her school. This creates ownership in the students and builds the students' leadership capacity. As school leaders in a high poverty high needs district, we must take every opportunity to empower our African American students to be actively engaged in school. Involving the students in the design and implementation of

programs and services builds an authentic connection to school for the students. In the larger context of the study, this reinforces the power of engagement, relationship development, and creating high expectations for students.

#### Principal 7

*I think that having not just the building of relationships and advocating for kids, but also having a positive role model that's representative of the students culture, is really important as well* (Participant 7, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 7 is an accomplished school site principal. She has served as principal at three different schools and she has experienced success in each school. She has nearly 20 years of experience in education and she exudes a maternal attribute that has served her well during her years leading elementary schools. She understands that in order to get work done she has to be flexible and supportive of her staff. Throughout her interview she displays a “protective mom” perspective as she discusses her school:

Any school that I've ever been at, it's been really important that when I felt than an adult was targeting a student because of their color or their behavior and associated that with their color, that it was really important to stay close to that student and to be more of an advocate or to reach out even further to the student so that they would feel that someone was on their side (Participant 7, personal communication, August, 2014).

The act of advocating and supporting the students is a natural act for Participant 7. It is a part of who she is as a leader. Participant 7 states:

If I were to see a student, no matter if they were African-American, Hispanic, Caucasian, whatever, if they showed up in my office one too many times in my opinion, then I would follow them back to class and see why is this student, what is the cause and condition of them getting in trouble so much? Then, to try and either advocate for the student or place that student in a more sensitive environment or an environment that I felt that they would be given, not necessarily leniency, but acceptance, because I think that's all a student really needs, is to feel that they are accepted and appreciated for who they are (Participant 7, personal communication, August, 2014).

These actions show Participant 7's equity-minded leadership style. She doesn't readily accept the exclusion of students from learning. She wants to have an understanding of the root causes of why students are being excluded from learning and then make the best decision possible to meet the needs of the students. Participant 7 has also incorporated a personalized attention for students into her instructional supervision routine. She accomplishes this by paying special attention to how African American students are treated within the classroom setting. States Participant 7:

When I walk through classrooms, I like to see our African-American students are engaged, that they're held accountable, but not humiliated.

That's really important...that the student has a sense of belonging to the classroom and to the school as a whole. I think all students should be held to high standards of learning, but with some students, there needs to be a level of flexibility in the way that you address either their lack of engagement or their lack of production (Participant 7, personal communication, August, 2014).

She continues:

I noticed that, in African-American males, especially going head-to-head, does not work. It just doesn't work. It just makes for ... Nobody wins. That has been my experience in all my years. Better to go side-to-side, "How's it going? Let's take a walk" and really, that should be done with all kids. It really should be done with all kids, but there are some students who will respond to that more often. I think that a general sense of mutual respect needs to be built, and so that's really the bottom line of what I like to see, is a mutual respect throughout the school (Participant 7, personal communication, August, 2014).

The data above suggest that Participant 7 feels a strong needs to support and personally meet the needs of her students. It is this personal equity-driven leadership practice and attention that many African American students need in order to help them feel connected to school. Additionally, the meaningful connection to the students by their principal is an effective leadership strategy



that can lead to meaningful change in school culture, organizational climate, and student achievement.

Participant 7 also shared during her interview how important she believed it was to have positive symbols of African American history and culture. She felt strongly that these symbols would resonate with the students and reinforce motivation and positive behavior of African American students. As an example when discussing potential research topics for student essays, Participant 7 shares:

When you have research topics, you have people who may be scientists who are African-American, authors who are African-American, literature that's from an African-American writer, so that all cultures can be represented, and especially the African-American culture, that that's represented as well (Participant 7, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 7 goes on to say that the positive influence of successful African American adults has an impact on performance and behaviors of students. She points to the specific example of a strong African American vice principal that she worked with at a previous school site. She shared:

In thinking back [to when], we saw a huge spike when [a new Vice Principal], joined my team. The year that [the VP] was there, our African-American test scores shot up. I mean kids jumped like 2 and 3 levels. She's an African-American woman. Not only was she helping me to build

relationships with our African-American students, but she was also advocating and following the kids back into the classroom and checking up on them (Participant 7, personal communication, August, 2014).

The above data emphasizes the importance of positive representations of African Americans and African American culture. Participant 7 recognizes the importance and then intentionally creates the systems and structure for students. The researcher took for granted the importance of providing positive visuals and resources for African American students. He also saw that the use of testimonials by successful African Americans holds great power when trying to relate to the students and give them hope and a vision of what their future might be.

Participant 7 is a successful principal that has proven she can build excellent schools regardless of the environment and extenuating circumstances. In an effort to meet the needs of her African American students, Participant 7 focuses on being personal with her students and genuinely caring for them as people. This data has implications for the larger context of the overall study in that this develops a basis for understanding how powerful relationships are in closing the achievement gap for African American students.

#### Principal 8

*Ownership means to me... it's our school, it's our kids, it's our data, and it's our fault in terms of what is going on...so therefore let's work together to help in areas that we need that support* (Participant 8, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 8 is a highly experienced school administrator. He has 16 years of experience in education and half of that time has been spent serving as an elementary school principal. He was asked to lead a school that had a history of challenges meeting state and federal performance targets. As a result of the sanctions, he has been strategic about developing whole school systems and structures that will help the school produce enhanced services and outcomes for the students. He noted the early challenges of trying to create a well functioning system that would best serve the students. He shared:

So when I got here my first thing was really observing the strengths of the teachers and putting them in their correct grade level [based on] what I thought they [should teach] to best meet the [students'] needs...really developing those professional learning communities in regards to helping the staff to feel comfortable talking [about professional practice]. One thing that we created was monthly data reflection sessions...where we looked at the data as teachers but we looked at it in [through the eyes] of the students and [that's] what that created our RTI program. So during a set time per grade level we have the challenge kids go with one group, benchmark students go with another, intense, strategic and ELD. So in terms of looking at the data it was not looking at the teacher but looking at the student (Participant 8, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 8 was very systems driven in his approach to leading his campus. His approach to being reflective and looking at data through the eyes of

the students attempts to get his teachers personalizing what it means to be a student in their own classroom. The researcher believes Participant 8 uses this strategy to get his teachers to be more responsive to the individual needs of students and less fixated on the content, standards, and pacing guides that have driven education under the provisions of No Child Left Behind.

Participant 8 keeps a focus on the needs of his students by placing an emphasis on the Individual Learning Plans (ILP) of his students. This ILP process became a focus of Participant 8's school when the school was designated as a Persistently Low Achieving School (PLAS) in 2010. Participant 8 placed a large amount of fiscal and personnel resources into the development of ILPs for the students of his school. Throughout the interview with Participant 8 he stressed the value and importance of using the ILP as a tool for monitoring and developing the students. He shared:

We have created systems in regards to monitoring student achievement through our RTI program and individual learning plans process. I think a uniform system for tracking student progress through the individual learning plans was very crucial because, again, we created a system so therefore we did not have teachers just putting kids in to be tested but again really looking at skill gaps and then making sure that we are meeting those needs through our RTI program (Participant 8, personal communication, August, 2014).

This data shows again the commitment to meeting the needs of individual students within the school. Participant 8 realizes that the most effective way to meet the needs of students is to analyze students' skills gaps and then create a plan that will be rigorous and responsive to the student. Personalized attention from school staff is an important factor in connecting with African American students. Many African American students have a disproportionate number of negative interactions with school staff. The ILP process is formative and creates a dialogue with the student that is focused on success, support, and growth.

By creating responsive structures for African American students through whole school data analysis coupled with individual learning plan development, Participant 8 has created a framework for pursuing excellence in the performance of his African American students. When asked if African American students should have a different set of standards when pursuing excellence, Participant 8 had the following response:

I think within creating standards there needs to be specific standards related to African American students in the sense of something to hold people [faculty, staff, and administration] accountable for making sure that we are addressing the needs of African American students just because of our community and what we are up against. So with that there has to be something specifically, I think to help people to stay focused on what the prize is and that is student achievement (Participant 8, personal communication, August, 2014).

This data shows an interesting mindset that Participant 8 has when discussing who is responsible for pursuing excellence in African American students. He clearly places the responsibility and accountability on the adults of the school system to hold themselves to a higher standard when considering how we support African American student achievement. The researcher sensed that Participant 8 feels strongly that it is our responsibility as educators to create the conditions for our African American students to be successful. He reflected on his role as a principal and shared that he fully believes that his essential role is do whatever it takes to make his students academically successful. He validates this assertion when he states:

My role is vital. For having students here and not doing all that we can do to help them [be successful] to get to grade level and mastery... shame on us. This is why it is so important that there is systems to progress monitor all kids but especially for African American students if that is the focus (Participant 8, personal communication, August, 2014).

This data clearly articulates Participant 8's staunch belief that accountability and progress monitoring is a duty of the adults within the schools and more specifically, he believes that it is a core duty of the principal to serve as an advocate for students. The researcher believes Participant 8's position is a reflection of his educational experiences as an African American male. He is a success story and now believes that he must take responsibility for leading our current African American students towards academic excellence.

Participant 8's success at his school is clearly demonstrated in his student performance outcomes. His commitment to systems and differentiated support is a model that will add value to many of the district's schools. A theme that was apparent throughout his interview was increased accountability for staff and faculty will enable the school to develop high expectations for students. The high expectations for students Participant 8 is creating in his school enables him to create an organizational climate that can close the achievement gap for African American students.

#### Principal 9

*I just think it's a lack of leadership in general and principals not knowing how to cultivate the instructional pieces on campus. I think we have principals out there that aren't academically savvy and able to go in a classroom and see a type of teacher that's going really going to engage your African American youth, versus the one that's not (Participant 9, personal communication, August, 2014).*

Participant 9 is another career long member of the school district. She is in her 15<sup>th</sup> year of education, and has spent the entire time in middle schools. The immediate feeling and tone I got from Participant 9 was of focus and commitment to the advancement and achievement of African American students. This was evidenced by her knowledge of her school's student data. She shared, "I tend to look out for my African American kids, because my number here is

manageable. I have about a hundred and eighteen, or nineteen” (Participant 9, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 9 has worked in some of the district’s toughest middle schools. She has been working with high poverty high needs students her entire career. As a teacher she developed the mindset and mentality that her African American students matter and should be closely monitored. She has carried that same mindset into being a school site principal and continues to closely monitor her African American student population. This tells me that Participant 9 is highly reflective and highly engaged in the advancement and achievement of her African American students. Participant 9 has a focus on meeting the needs of African American students that was evident from the moment we begin the interview.

She is intentional about creating an organizational culture based on high expectations and relationships for her students. It is clear that she takes special care to provide an environment where students can be successful:

We're highly focused now on providing rigorous curriculum for students. We're highly inclusive for kids and one of our biggest beliefs as a school site is that the student to teacher or student to adult and staff relationships are key in getting the kids to be motivated to do the things that we want them to do within the classroom. This requires the participation and understanding of all staff, including everyone down from admin, teachers, and staff... everybody is required to learn how to speak to kids



respectfully, cultivate relationships to connect and challenge our kids to be better than how they came in (Participant 9, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 9 understands that in order to meet the needs of all students (including African Americans), she must create the environment for the students and staff. She intentionally focuses on relationships and providing a rigorous curriculum. Additionally, she stresses the importance of effective pedagogy when providing instruction to African American students. She learned effective pedagogy through courses she took in African American studies as well as professional development opportunities in culturally relevant pedagogy. I see this as an effective strategy to create academic excellence in schools. This assertion is supported by the research of Ferguson (2002) who proposed the Instructional Tripod framework for increasing achievement of African American students. The components of the tripod include; content, pedagogy, and relationships. Participant 9 has created a framework similar to the work of Ferguson, which indicates she is committed to advancing the performance and achievement of African American students. As a researcher it is exciting to see a school principal using a framework referenced in the literature as her method for trying to move her school towards academic excellence.

In essence, by her actions it is clear to see that Participant 9 is committed to continuously molding the culture of her school while keeping a keen focus on the needs of African American students. Participant 9 continuously reinforced her

expectation and vision for an inclusive school and made certain to adopt the instructional methodologies that were conducive to moving that vision forward. She has a solid background in curriculum and professional development and models lessons for her teachers to show her abilities to model effective instruction. She reflected on her experiences below:

I have a strong academic background, I was a national board certified teacher, I had high test scores when I was teaching English, and I've kept my, even as a principal, I've kept up with pedagogy, and anything I try to teach my teachers to do with kids, I demonstrate for them in staff development. It starts with us, as leaders, demonstrating that we could do these types of strategies. If I'm up there and I'm telling them to practice close reading, I usually, as the admin team, we get together and we demonstrate it for the staff. We have to keep routine and repeat that learning cycle for teachers. Moving a staff, and teaching them strategies, it takes a long time (Participant 9, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 9 clearly takes pride in being an instructional leader. She values leading her faculty through the professional learning process. She believes it is a core responsibility for her but also understands the large time commitment needed and complexity of it when she shared:

I can demonstrate a strategy in a staff development with my teachers five times, [and it] still [is] not enough. I still have to go in, watch them do it, adjust, demonstrate it again. It took a long time before I could get all my

staff doing a highly effective think-pair-share (Participant 9, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 9 has internalized how much credibility she has with her faculty as she actively leads the professional learning on her campus. As a fellow school principal, the researcher sees opportunities for growing as an instructional leader and setting up the systems and structures where my students and staff can grow through professional learning. The researcher recognizes that his leadership will improve as he continues to seek ways to increase faculty professional learning. The actions of Participant 9 strongly align with Kannapel and Clements (2005) work in high performing high poverty schools. A core function of high performing high poverty schools is a commitment to ongoing professional development that is closely aligned to student achievement data. Participant 9 has committed to using that process for all of her student subgroups including her African Americans.

After working with Participant 9 during this study, it is clear to the researcher that she is driven to help African American students achieve academically. She has no reservations about being explicit about her support of African American student achievement. She has a lot of information to offer other principals around closing the achievement gap because of her extensive instructional background and experience in African American studies. She will continue to excel and it is the researcher's hope that she is able to share some of her experiences with a larger group of education leaders.

### Principal 10

*That first year here was probably my most difficult year, and I've been at a lot of schools. I mean I have the background, but this (school) was the most challenging as far as being an instructional leader because the problem here was not kids. The problem here was adults* (Participant 10, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 10 is a seasoned middle school educator. She has 23 years of middle school educator experience, and has spent the last five years serving as a middle school principal at two different schools. As with most of the study participants, Participant 10 has spent her entire career with the district and in her particular case she also grew up as a student within the district as well. She displays her no nonsense type attitude and deep commitment to high expectations and fostering a sense of accountability when she stated:

I am not a big believer of coming in and being in your face and saying, 'This is bad' but I took them through like "Let's look at the progression of your test scores. In 10 years, you have made zero growth, if you look at it. You started here. You went up, you went down, you went up, you went down, and you came right back to where you were. (Participant 10, personal communication, August, 2014).

This focus on data as a point of conversation and an impetus for making organizational change was a deliberate strategy for Participant 10. She shared that when she received the call about her assignment to a new school, she was

not happy. "I'll be honest, this was, of any school in the district, this [was one of two schools] I never wanted to work at" (Participant 10, personal communication, August, 2014). She was on vacation with her family when she received the news and immediately reflected on previous experiences she had at her "soon to be new" campus when she reflected:

Just my perception of the school, my inner workings with them just seemed ... Things with like sports, how sports was the end-all, be-all, and I'm all into sports, and I love sports, but that seems like all they were about, and then I had heard just ... I'd heard a lot of negative things, and then I had done walkthroughs over here [previously], and I was like "Oh my goodness". (Participant 10, personal communication, August, 2014).

The angst and apprehension that Participant 10 was feeling regarding her assignment to her current school was really more about the challenges of dealing with adult behaviors in the school. When she describes all of her previous experiences, the negatives have to do with adult perceptions and adult behaviors. Her response was to immediately address the adult mindsets and behaviors throughout the school. As a school administrator, the researcher agrees that one of the most challenging situations in school leadership is to change adult mindsets. These deficit mindsets are manifested in policies, procedures, and interactions between adults and students in the school. Participant 10 admits that she is achieving success and moving the school toward improved academic outcomes, but she also admits that it took having to

change the culture of the school in order for progress to happen. She knew significant changes had to be made as she entered the administration office on her very first day. She shared:

That first ... When I walked on this campus, just the difference as far as where we were, and where we are now, is dramatic, and that doesn't have to just do with me. That just has to do with the team and how we've moved things forward, but when I first walked in, a sign to me that there was adult problems was when I walked around this office, there were signs everywhere, "Don't do this. Don't do that. Stay out of here," "Go away" basically, and so I was like "Why is there so much negative stuff in here?" so I ripped out signs down. (Participant 10, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant wasn't initially stunned by the climate established in the front office. She quickly remembered all of her previous experiences and knew it was her responsibility to change the culture and climate of the school. School leadership is very challenging and the complexities of leadership are only exacerbated when deficit mindsets are prevalent throughout the organization. The need for high expectations and affirming mindsets are crucial to the African American student experience.

After that initial experience, Participant 10 realized that she was going to need to engage in some courageous conversations with her faculty and staff in order for them to clearly understand the expectations that were going to be the

“new norm” for them. At her first professional development meeting with the faculty she clearly laid out the expectations when she stated:

I’m a stickler for time, like “We start at 7:50. You better be in here at 7:50.”

The first day, like 10 people walked in late, and I just stood there, and I had a conversation about it. I said “We’re going to address this right now.

I’m not mean, I’m not degrading anybody, but this is the way it is.”

(Participant 10, personal communication, August, 2014).

This straight talk and clear delineation of what was expected is a strength that Participant 10 relies on in order to execute her vision for the schools she leads. She clearly articulates this position as she shares her thoughts on school wide expectations:

I am always consistent with my message of “We are here for all kids. We will believe that all kids can learn at high levels, and we are not going to pigeon hole anybody, and you will have those same expectations”

(Participant 10, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 10 clearly communicated throughout the interview how important it was for staff to have high expectations for each and every student in her school. This construct plays throughout the literature as well. Wiggan (2007) found that teacher expectations played a significant role in student achievement outcomes. This further validates Participant 10’s perspective about how important it is to be hyper-vigilant about inspecting what you expect from our teachers. She best captured her thoughts on this topic when she stated, “This is

my expectation. We are here for all kids, and this is what I'm about, and ... I'm relentless with that piece" (Participant 10, personal communication, August, 2014).

### Summary of Participant Profiles

Before presenting the significant themes that have surfaced as a result of this research, a participant profile was provided to give deeper understanding of how the study participants have experienced leading their schools. Special attention was paid to personalizing each participant so a contextual foundation was laid. This foundation will assist in connecting the principal's actions, practices, and behaviors in the significant themes section. As a guide, the data presented in the significant themes section will be presented by finding, and then by participant. The rationale for presenting the data in this fashion is to provide the reader with rich data that can be examined finding by finding. In addition, the intent of providing the data analysis in this fashion is to demonstrate the strong connection across participants of the practices and behaviors that are assisting African American students achieve.

### Part Three: Significant Themes

After coding all interview transcripts, reviewing all field notes, and analyzing my written research memos, there were three key themes that emerged. The three themes help to assist with understanding how urban school



principals are leading their schools in an effort create systems that work to close the achievement gap for African American students. More specifically, the aim of this study was to more deeply understand the practices, perceptions, and lived experiences of each principal participant as they grappled with leading highly diverse urban schools. The following three topics will help to deeply explain the organizational challenges of closing achievement gap in a diverse urban school, along with the personal struggles of leaders who are faced with issues of equity, race, and public education. The themes derived from the interview data will explain some best practices that occur in high diverse urban schools. Additionally, the themes will help to advance the answers to the research questions guiding this study, which are as follows:

1. How do Inland Empire school principals develop leadership strategies and practices that successfully close the achievement gap for low-income African American students?
2. What are the perceptions, experiences, and challenges of Inland Empire public school principals who are successfully closing the achievement gap for African American students?
3. In what ways does research question 1 and researcher question 2 help us to develop equitable leaders, leadership practices, and schools that promote success and achievement of African American students?

The three themes that emerged from the study data include the following:

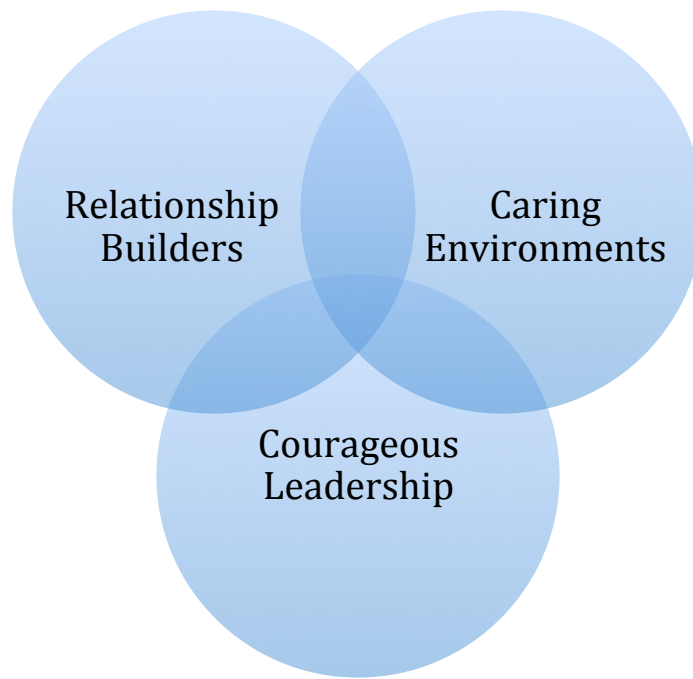
1. Relationship builders: The principals stressed the need to build relationships with African American students. The demand for relationships from the principals in this study reinforces vast amounts of literature supporting the belief that in order to close the achievement gap for African American students, the student must feel connected and have an authentic relationship with an adult on campus.

2. Caring environment: The principals expressed throughout the interviews that they felt it was important to create schools and staff that had authentic care for the students they served. The principals believed that when care was shown for all students, including African American it created a school where learning and achievement could thrive.

Conversely, principals also shared that creating a caring environment was also difficult to accomplish when adult mindsets were slow to change

3. Courageous leadership: The principals stressed the importance of being progressive and creating effective ways of connecting to the students and family. Additionally, the principals shared some of the challenges they experience when considering the needs of African American students and the support structures they create for them. Lastly, some of the principals shared how they push the agenda for African American students to ensure that there is equity and support for their students.

Figure 4 visually represents the findings of the study and begins to explain the concepts surrounding effective urban school principal leadership. The three findings relationship building, caring environment, and courageous leadership strongly interrelate with one another and in many ways are dependent upon each other. The constructs of relationship building and caring environment sit in their position because they are of equal importance and they serve to build schools that are sensitive to the needs of African American students. Courageous leadership on the other hand sits as the foundation for the development of equity based and socially just schools. It bears the weight of the other two constructs and allows them to connect and co-exist.



*Figure 4. Constructs of Effective Urban School Principal Leadership*

#### Theme 1: Relationship Builders

According to the participants, developing relationships with teachers, students and parents was crucial to the success of African American students. As the study participants considered the power of relationship building, Participant 9 stated the following:

We're highly inclusive for kids and one of our biggest beliefs as a school site is that the student to teacher or student to adult and staff relationships are key in getting the kids to be motivated to do the things that we want them to do within the classroom (Participant 9, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 9's statement represented a major theme that nine of the ten study participants discussed throughout each of their respective interviews. The building of relationships appeared to be a major factor that each of the principals internalized as an important practice that would lead to improved outcomes for African American students.

A number of the principal participants believed that the act of building relationships between adults and students is more important than the instructional strategies and standards of the class. During an interview, Participant 2 responded to the question, "In your experiences, what particular pedagogical approaches work for African American students?" with the following comment:

I think it doesn't matter. A lot of times we want to be stereotypical. I think it doesn't matter the strategies that you use in the classroom. It's all about that relationship with the kid. They'll listen to you, talk for hours if they know that you care. I mean that's probably not the most effective way to teach but they'll do what you want when you care (Participant 9, personal communication, August, 2014).

By her own admission, Participant 2 realizes that the standards and instruction may be missing, but she also see the importance of first connecting with the students before trying to teach them. Participant 6 echoes similar sentiments regarding the importance of building relationships with students first. She shared:

I would say that the other big part of that is building relationships with students. If the first time I'm talking to any student is to correct them for doing something wrong or to pull them in because their grades are low, that should never happen (Participant 6, personal communication, August, 2014).

Both Participant 2 and Participant 6's comments reflect their understanding of how delicate the relationship between teacher and students can be. Furthermore, they realize that connecting with African American students is crucially important when wanting to pursue the arduous task of closing the African American achievement gap.

Several of the principals have internalized the importance of building relationships specifically with African American students. As a part of their leadership practice, they incorporate a belief that relationships are essential and they expect the student to teacher relationship to constantly be nurtured by staff. Participant 4 shared his thoughts regarding his expectations of staff when building relationships with African American students:

We talk about building relationships here. We talk about how do we connect with our scholars more. One of our norms is that we will find ways to connect with our diverse scholars here. That's why we talk about that in our professional development. How do we bring these norms and values to life more (Participant 4, personal communication, August, 2014)?

One can see how Participant 4 has embedded relationship building into the culture of his school by speaking of it frequently and incorporating it into his school's professional development. He continued with:

For example, when I was a teacher over here at sixth grade I had [a particularly challenging young man] in my class. Boy, I had one of the worst classes ever. This boy didn't come to school. He didn't have any grease for his hair. Nappy-headed, picking. I went to the store, got that boy some grease. I went to his house at about 4:30. I saw the mom, "Here you go." Whatever. "I need him to come to school and feel confident in the classroom." When you care, you do whatever it takes to get the job done (Participant 4, personal communication, August, 2014).

This data shows that Participant 4 has made developing relationships a priority for many years. He went above and beyond for his students when he was a teacher, and now, as a principal he has the same high expectations of his staff.

The principals also explained that it was important to be explicit about developing relationships with African American students. These principals believe that if they are successful at getting the adults in the schools to focus on building relationships the achievement gap could be eliminated. Participant 8 shared his thoughts when he said:

It is important for teacher, administrator, [and] any adult really to build positive relationships especially with African American students because if they do not trust you then it is going to be hard for you to let down those

walls sometimes in order to do what is going on (Participant 8, personal communication, August, 2014).

He continued by saying:

To build those relationships I guess they would have to kind of change their style in order to meet the kids that they have in front of them in that year because it changes from year to year. All kids need something different (Participant 8, personal communication, August, 2014).

This data illustrates that all adults have a responsibility to be there for African American students. As the achievement gap has persisted for decades, today's effective leaders are seeing the value in developing relationships as a means of connecting to students and their diverse needs.

Participant 1 explained her perspective regarding why using relationships to differentiate for students is crucial when she responded to the following question, "What do you feel are the specific practices, processes, or policies that hinder the success of African American students?" She commented as follows:

Not having the knowledge and building relationships on the background of where the kids come from. If the kids come from a place where they don't sit together at the dinner table but they're expect to cooperate at the school in a collaborative setting, we need to make those connections and help them build those strategies to transfer in different social settings.

When teachers don't take the time to build those relationships to get to know their students from different backgrounds and different cultures, that



hinders what success a child can have in school (Participant 1, personal communication, August, 2014).

This data reflects Participant 1's desire for her staff to connect with the students personally and be sensitive to the cultural and social needs of the students. This type of relationship building will tightly bind the student and teacher together and allow for authentic learning and engagement.

#### Summary of Relationship Builders

The act of connecting and building a relationship with African Americans students was a significant finding within the study. The principals shared that relationships were important to meeting the needs of African American students. The principals further stated that it was an expectation that the adults within their schools focus on the relationships they had with students. As we transition to Theme 2, Caring Environment, you will notice some similarities between Caring Environments and Relationship Building. However, they are different. A large number of the participants saw building relationships as something every adult in the school should be doing. Conversely, caring for students and creating a caring environment was viewed by the principals as a way of being, meaning, it was an overt action you could see or hear. Rather, you felt genuineness from people who care.

#### Theme 2: Caring Environment

An important variable in creating a school that is sensitive to the needs of African American students is that of a caring environment. Participant 4 stressed

the importance of care and genuine support of students if we want to maximize student achievement. He willingly admits that it may not be a pedagogical approach but explains that teachers who exercise care and create a nurturing environment for student are more apt to meet the needs of our students.

Participant 4 showed immense passion when he described care and the impact care can have on student environment:

...[This] may not be a pedagogical practice but it's at the heart of what we do in schools. Number one, you have got to care for your kids and you show that through how you talk to them, you show that through how you interact with them, you show that through how you hold them accountable for learning. You just don't let them skate by with any old kind of work that they're trying to give you. The whole process of caring for the students you serve and that's sitting in front of you on a daily basis (Participant 4, personal communication, August, 2014).

Just in Participant 4's comments you understand and feel his passion for creating an environment where students are taken care of and nurtured by the teacher. This passionate response tells me that Participant 4 expects his teachers to create a caring environment and he will hold his staff accountable if they fail to meet this expectation.

Similarly, Participant 6 shared her opinion of the importance of a caring environment:

Having this caring environment where [we are] continuously improving, building character, and overall those things [help us say, this] is a place you want to be. Not just for our students. This is where our teachers want to be. This is where our staff wants to be. This is where parents want to be. The only way to be that is to be that every day. Make it a place you want to be. Make it a place where the kids want to be (Participant 6, personal communication, August, 2014).

This data clearly shows what Participant 6 wants to create as an institution when it comes to care and creating an environment focused on caring not only for students, but also for all stakeholders within that system. Participant 6 wants to make sure that a caring environment is something that everyone in the organization is trying to create. She understands that this will be a tough task but by working with her campus community and instilling a growth mindset, she will craft a culture that focuses on caring.

A significant challenge that some study participants have experienced has been faculty ambivalence to the importance of caring for students. Participants 1 & 2 specifically voiced concerns regarding getting staff members to be proponents of caring classrooms and a caring school community. Participant 1 explained the challenge as follow, "...One thing you can't instill in teachers is caring for students especially students that don't look like them or act like them when they come from different worlds" (Participant 1, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 2 also expressed a concern about the perils of not having faculty take ownership of creating a caring environment. She commented as follows:

We've gone through a lot here in the district. We've been through culturally relevant teaching. We've been through a lot of those trainings. The real question is not whether they're aware. The question becomes do they care. That's a whole different question. That's a whole different set of circumstances and that's why I do straight talk. There's a difference if you know versus if you do know and you just don't care. If you're that person that just doesn't know and doesn't care, you don't need to be here. It's my job to help you find something else (Participant 2, personal communication, August, 2014).

The data above reveals two important points. Each of the principals realizes that some of the mindsets of the staff need to change to create the caring environment they both seek for their campuses. The dichotomy that exists is the stance that each of the respective principals take regarding what they will do. Participant 1 makes no declarative statement and seems to accept that those mindsets will exist. Participant 2 makes a very clear statement of her intent with any staff member that doesn't care. I assume that Participant 1 will do her best to navigate around those mindsets and do her best to focus her attention on staff members who have adopted the mindset and direction she wants to pursue.

Participant 2 on the other hand, will have courageous conversations with anyone not focused on creating a caring environment for students.

This type of inconsistent action that occurs between Participant 1 and 2 is one of the biggest challenges to closing the achievement gap. Participant 1 is 3<sup>rd</sup> year principal that has 3 years of experience in the school district and Participant 2 is a 7<sup>th</sup> years principal with 14 years of experience in the district. This data tells us that consistent leadership by all principals is needed to create the schools that will best serve at risk African American students.

Several participants in the study stressed the importance of the classroom environment as a powerful influence on the performance of African American students and their teachers. Participant 2 shared:

I can take you around [to] classroom[s], any classroom and I don't have to tell you anything but you'll get a feel for the culture of that classroom just by walking in [and you'll know] if that kid [is] cared [for], if that teacher really cares about kids. You just do, kids do (Participant 2, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 3 echoes similar sentiments about the classroom environment. He shared:

When you know the individual child and not that individual child as a race or ethnicity, but the individual child in terms of their needs. All children need the same thing. They need to know they're in a warm welcoming

environment. People here care for them...(Participant 3, personal communication, August, 2014).

This data shows that principals have internalized how important the classroom environment is for their students and more specifically they are sensitive to the perspective of the student. They want students to know that caring environments is what they should expect in their classrooms. Nurturing and supportive teachers are what they should come to expect in classrooms. Each of these principals is striving to create schools that are focused on meeting the needs of their diverse students.

#### Summary of Caring Environment

When principals focus on creating schools that foster a caring environment, it changes the dynamic of the teaching and learning paradigm throughout the school. Individuals are more responsive, collaborative, and sensitive to the needs of others. As previously, stated creating a caring environment is a way of being and believing as educators. It sets the moral compass of the people in the organization and demands that people behave and believe in ways that support the needs of all people. Principals in this study were very sensitive to building a caring environment and many viewed the caring environment as a pivotal piece in designing a school that can close the African American achievement gap.

### Theme 3: Courageous Leadership

The third theme that emerged from the interview responses was the concept of courageous leadership. Courageous leadership can be defined in many ways but in the context of this study courageous leadership is when principals engage in designing and deciding what's best for their campus and students. In other words, the principals made decisions or tackled topics that might be difficult to discuss because they are committed to the mission of creating a school that is equitable for all students, including at risk African American students. These courageous leadership actions have created high performing environments, culturally sensitive environments, and school staffs that will go above and beyond for their students and school community. An example of how courageous leadership has created a culturally sensitive environment can be found in Participant 9's response to the following interview question, "How do you think principals establish or develop a school that is sensitive to the needs of African American students?" She shared:

I would say the first thing of course is I always say safety first, no matter what I'm talking about. We establish first, a safe campus and that's key, any kid needs to come in and feel safe, so in particular for African American kids, we have to establish relationships, would be the secondary and the third would be structure. Structured environments. Then, within that structured environment, again, we need to teach everything explicitly. In the culture that I work with, being that their low socioeconomic urban

type of school or environment, I think we need to explicitly teach those skills, which they didn't get at some point in their schooling and probably undo the negative relationships with teachers and just things they never picked up on, and how to be successful in their social skills. I think if the school can focus on those things and then begin to connect with kids through structure, social skills, and then challenge them as students to push in that rigor, they love that challenge. I found that my kids love... I've got a particular teacher in mind right now that just pushes them on to places they never thought they could, to use their brain and get excited about it. I think if we're not giving them that rigorous curriculum, and pushing and challenging the kids, then we're also not capturing our African American students ...(Participant 9, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 9's response captures the importance of challenging all students while keeping the needs of a sensitive population in the forefront of her mind as she designs the systems of the school. Without the leader's vision of how to create equitable schools the status quo will remain in tact and there is clear evidence throughout the literature that status quo doesn't work for closing the African American achievement gap.

Other principal participants also displayed their commitment to being innovative and progressive in designing and implementing programs that will best serve the needs of African American students. Particularly, Participant 5 shared



how she was leveraging community resources and grants to provide excellent opportunities for her students. She shared:

We have a grant program... It's a \$700,000 grant and they work with three district elementary schools. They have a therapist, a person that's not a credential counselor but is basically a counselor on campus along with my other counselor. She's working with high needs students and their families... It's supposed to be family-oriented and... My African-American students, a lot of them are hooked up, especially the boys, are hooked up with the grant program (Participant 5, personal communication, August, 2014).

This data shows how courageous leadership has allowed Participant 5 to create new opportunities for her students and their families. She sees the value in extending the support of students beyond the classroom. This is evident in the social and mental health support services in addition to the extracurricular activities the students are exposed to through the grant. Many African American students need holistic support to achieve in school. Participant 5 is creating innovative solutions to a very complex problem.

While several principal participants are creating innovative programs to meet the needs of their African American students, other participants are struggling with developing explicit systems of support for African American students. Participant 7 shared her conflicted feeling when discussing the achievement gap when she said, "Even as a professional that loves all kids of all

colors it's [African American achievement gap] a very difficult topic (Participant 7, personal communication, August, 2014).

Other participants echoed this conflict and angst as well. Specifically, when asked, "How do you think principals establish or develop a school that is sensitive to the needs of African American students?" Participant 10 responded with the following:

I think that you could not come right out of the box doing that because I think people get defensive because they may think ... If you're a white person or a Latino person, "Oh, you're calling me a racist." You just have to be sensitive to that, I think, so you have to be ... You have to have a culture where you can have those conversations. In the same breadth, you can't wait 10 years to have that conversation. You have to know that you're moving in a path to have that conversation (Participant 10, personal communication, August, 2014).

Participant 1 echoed similar sentiments to the same question during her interview. She said the following:

I guess, establishing expectations there that meets [the needs of] all and not pinpointing out a certain culture or group. It doesn't look like they [teachers] become offensive, defensive that maybe they feel like they're racist. It's very difficult to have those difficult conversations where they don't feel like we're pinpointing out a group that's needs are not being met. I have to make it for everyone and create these strategies that can be

used amongst all cultural groups (Participant 1, personal communication, August, 2014).

The data from the participants above demonstrate two very powerful points. First, the discussion of race continues to be a challenge in education. In closely analyzing the actual quotes of each participant it is evident that they are conflicted and struggling with how they address this complex topic. The challenge of discussing race transcends education but needs to be a focus if the challenges of the achievement gap are to be addressed. Second, school leaders need to feel empowered to address issues of race and student achievement head on. If school leaders have these “invisible handcuffs” on them they are unable create the culture on their campuses that is needed to close the achievement gap.

#### Summary of Courageous Leadership

The principals stated that the positive impact of tackling tough topics and difficult decisions helped them develop their skills and abilities as leaders. The principals interviewed confirmed that some of the tough decisions they make for their campuses, challenge their previous belief and ideals. This shows their growth and development as leaders. The constant push for growth and development is essential for leaders in urban school settings. The more that leaders can be steadfast in the systems they design, structures they create, and social norms they challenge, the more of an effective leader they become. This

level of conviction is modeled for their employees as well as students and shows the importance of courage in leadership. Every principal participant in the study showed a variation of courageous leadership, and this demonstrates the powerful phenomenon of leadership and how courage is in the heart of the person displaying it.

### Comprehensive Summary of Findings

This phenomenological study of interviews, school and participant demographic information produced important data that addressed how urban school principals are developing leadership practices that work to close the African American achievement gap. The rich data provided by each participant through the individual participant profiles gives an understanding of who the principal is and what they are experiencing in their roles. Additionally, the three emergent themes from the interview data: relationship builders, caring environments, and courageous leadership pointed to best practices that could be focused on to close the achievement gap.

Building relationships was vitally important to the principal participants. The act of building a relationship between teacher and student, principal and student, or principal and teacher is a foundation for building a school that will have caring environments and a leader courageous enough to tackle issues like race and equity. The researcher uncovered that some of the principals viewed the building of relationships superior to the teaching of content. This meant that some principals supported the notion of building relationships before instructional

units. The researcher further found that principals wanted to create caring environments for the students and staff. These caring environments created the fertile ground within the school to build relationships. Lastly, the researcher learned from the principals the importance of courageous leadership. This theme was important and demonstrated the principals' commitment to creating equitable schools in the face of a challenging topic like race and a complex societal issue like the African American achievement gap.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

#### Summary of the Findings

The goal of this phenomenological study was to critically analyze the lived experiences of urban school principals who are working to close the achievement gap for African American students. By critically analyzing the experiences of ten school principals, this study discovered best practices for effectively serving the needs of African American students. The impact of the school principal is significant and their leadership is crucial for developing practices and systems that benefit their students and school community.

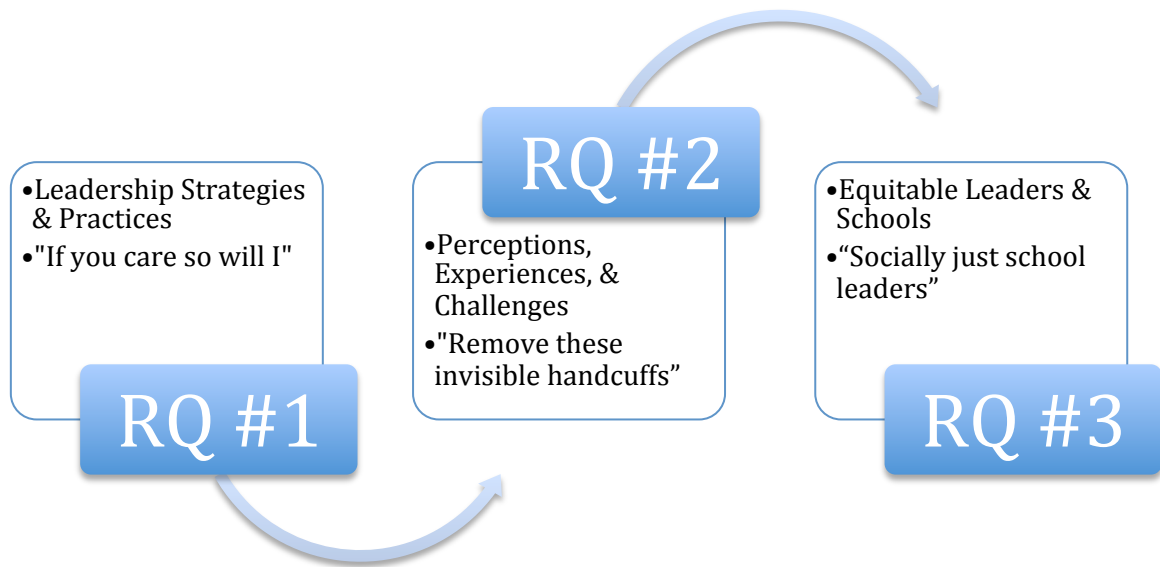
This chapter is organized into four sections. The first section begins by presenting an interpretation of the emerging themes related to the research questions guiding the study. The second section discusses the findings of the study and their application to the conceptual framework developed from the literature of the study. The third section of this chapter discusses the implications of the findings on current research, K-12 leadership practice, and district policy related to African American student achievement. Finally, the chapter concludes with final thoughts on the study's findings for dissemination and future research.

This phenomenological study used narrative inquiry and participant observations to provide an explanatory composite of the perspectives and behaviors of urban school principals. The overt and covert practices that urban

school principals must employ to connect with and improve education for African American students are a complex challenge. This phenomenological study addressed the following research questions in response to the challenge:

1. How do Inland Empire public school principals develop leadership strategies and practices that successfully close the achievement gap for low-income African American students?
2. What are the perceptions, experiences, and challenges of Inland Empire public school principals who are successfully closing the achievement gap for African American students?
3. In what ways does research question 1 and research question 2 help us develop equitable leaders, leadership practices, and schools that promote the success and achievement of African American students?

Figure 5 is a visual representation of what was found in the data to answer each of the respective research questions.



*Figure 5. Research Questions and Thematic Conclusions*

### Summary of the Research Questions

#### Research Question One

*How do Inland Empire public school principals develop leadership strategies and practices that successfully close the achievement gap for low-income African American students?*

As participants described their experiences leading schools and working to close the achievement gap, the data analysis revealed that all participants agreed that meeting the needs of their students was a priority. As noted in Chapter 4, the principals focused their attention on either actively building relationships or creating a caring environment for African American students. In a vast number of interviews, the principals shared that building relationships and



caring environments are the foundation for high levels of engagement and increased academic achievement for African American students.

Universally, the participants saw the value in being genuine with their students and connecting with them personally. This finding is supported by prior research that found a correlation between relationship building and a corresponding positive impact on the closing the achievement gap (Ferguson, 2002). For example, participants shared that as relationships developed, African American students developed trust with their teachers and school. As trust developed, the relationship strengthened and authentic student engagement ensued.

Further analysis of the data revealed that caring environments have been a leadership practice regularly utilized by the study participants. Multiple participants shared that showing students you care creates an environment where learning can occur and strong accountability can be exercised by the teacher or administrator. This finding is supported by the high performing high poverty schools research. Genuine care from deeply committed staff creates deeply engaged students and high performance (Kannapel & Clements, 2005). As a result, participants felt a core leadership practice was creating and nurturing a caring environment within their school.

## Research Question Two

*What are the perceptions, experiences, and challenges of Inland Empire public school principals who are successfully closing the achievement gap for African American students?*

The data analysis associated with research question 2 shows that several of the principal participants grappled with significant challenges related to closing the achievement gap. Three participants explicitly stated their troubles dealing with effective ways to provide overt support to their African American student population. This trepidation is most likely related to the challenges of discussing race in public schools. However, principals understand that to be effective leaders of urban schools, they must be able to embrace the challenges of race and do what is right for their students. Leaders must embrace diversity in schools and provide their employees opportunities to increase their understanding of issues concerning race (Payzant, 2011). However, the issues of race place “invisible handcuffs” on leaders and inhibit them from making the decision to do whatever it takes for African American students.

The data analysis suggests that there is a need to provide principals with clear guidance and support on how to discuss issues of race and diversity. In numerous cases the participants discussed the need to meet the needs of all students. This suggests an internal conflict of whether it’s “okay” to do something for African American students. By marginalizing the needs of African American students principals are perpetuating the negative effects of critical race theory

(Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). The power of critical race theory permeates throughout education and it is incumbent upon school leaders to do the courageous thing and eliminate the apprehension they feel about overt support of African American students. It is this bold action that creates schools and leaders that are ready to close the achievement gap.

### Research Question Three

*In what ways does research question 1 and research question 2 help us develop equitable leaders, leadership practices, and schools that promote the success and achievement of African American students?*

Through their interview responses, the participants of the study described the challenges of not only closing the achievement gap but also the challenges of leading a highly diverse urban school in the Inland Empire. Several study participants had served their entire career within their current district. Their ability to thrive in challenging environments and lead through difficult times shows resiliency and determination. Nine participants served in the district as classroom teachers prior to assuming administrative duties. This shows the participants intimate understanding of the dynamics of the district and the needs of its students. When building relationships, it is crucial to also develop sensitivity to the cultural needs of the students and community you serve (Haycock, 2004). Additionally, this sensitivity to culture assists the participants in analyzing the practices and policies they create or allow to exist within their schools. It increases their awareness of issues of inequity and challenges their moral

compass to respond. This finding is supported by prior research that states creating schools focused on equity is practicing social justice leadership. Social justice leadership means focusing on a critical consciousness of doing what is right for students but also delicately balancing the strong instructional leadership and inclusive school structures needed to develop a high performing school (McKenzie et al., 2008).

Principal leadership is the key to designing high performing equity based schools. Six of the principals discussed at length the impact of school wide systems on improving the academic achievement of all students on their campuses. The development of systems increased the principals' ability to monitor the overall effectiveness of the instructional program and institutional climate of the school. This finding is supported in the high performing high poverty schools research. The research found that strong leadership coupled with clear institutional systems created the conditions for urban schools to excel (North Carolina State Department of Public Education, Division of Accountability, 2000). The principals in this study understand the importance of systems and have made concerted efforts to implement systems at their schools. This decision has resulted in significantly improved outcomes for their schools and students.

### Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework designed for this study attempts to explore the construct of effective urban school principal leadership. The five components of

the framework: critical race theory, closing the excellence gap, high performing high poverty schools, culturally relevant pedagogy, and effective urban school leadership contributes to the construct of urban school principal leadership.

Developing the conceptual framework for this study helped to create a focus on how to analyze the lived experiences of the study participants. As data was collected and themes emerged the conceptual framework was used to provide a guide and visual reminder of the “lenses” utilized to guide the study’s data analysis.

Lead by the conceptual framework, the lived experiences of the study participants revealed that leadership was critical to a school’s ability to address the African American achievement gap. The true value of leadership became evident as the participants discussed the challenges of connecting with impoverished communities and reticent school staff. As participants experienced those leadership challenges many of them grappled with issues of equity and race. Consequently, the voices of the principal participants provide a thoughtful reflection on the key capacities and leadership attributes that urban school principals need to possess to be successful with African American students. A conceptual framework analysis of the emerging themes describes the way urban school principals are leading their schools towards equity and increased African American student achievement.

## Relationship Building

The concept of relationship building was crucial to the participant's ability to build schools of equity. The research on principal leadership and equity describes the significance of relationship building and school climate (Wiggins, 1972). Furthermore, the literature on relationship building closely aligns with the five common traits of high performing high poverty schools. Kannapel and Clements (2005) found that high performing high poverty schools focused on building relationships between adults and students that prioritize high expectations and mutual respect.

Numerous study participants shared that relationships were so critical to successful student outcomes that they spent a large portion of their time making sure to personally connect with students. This data correlates with the urban school principal leadership research. The leadership practices of an effective urban school principal strive to make a positive difference within the urban school setting. Participant 6 shared, "I think that students need to see me as a person. We don't know what their background is just by what they look like. Part of that is developing relationships but letting them see you as a person." This heightened awareness of the importance of relationships is supported by the research of Benitez et.al (2009) who asserted, the more African American students are positively engaged by adults, the faster their self-concept and character improve. Improving the self-concept and confidence of African American students can have a profound impact on the school experiences of

African American students. Furthermore, as principals develop the leadership capacities to assist all adults in their schools to focus on building relationships, highly effective equitable schools will be created.

### Caring Environments

The participants conveyed that they wanted to create environments that showed students and the communities that there was authentic care for students. The subtle differences between relationship building and caring environments can be described as how adults create a connection to the students in the schools versus how principals develop a nurturing culture of the schools they lead. One of the first actions a principal must take is to recognize the mindsets and dispositions of the adults within their school. Culturally relevant pedagogy creates a school setting that values the diversity and differentiated perspectives of its participants (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Culturally relevant pedagogy practices show that the teacher cares about connecting with the students and their cultural backgrounds.

Creating a caring environment is a core responsibility of the school principal. Payzant's (2011) *Characteristics of Effective Urban School Leaders* details 17 key capacities effective urban school leaders possess. Of the 17 capacities, one emerges as strongly aligning with creating a caring environment. Leaders must model the behavior they expect others in the organization to model. This exemplifies the difference between the act of building a relationship and the modeling of the behavior necessary to create a caring environment.

Modeling how to create a caring environment was an important data point for multiple participants. Multiple participants shared how they internalized modeling and are now having the difficult conversations to address the mindsets and belief systems of staff. Collectively, the themes that emerged from this study demonstrated the need for principal leaders that will have the courage to create the conditions and environments where African American students can excel.

### Courageous Leadership

Showing appreciation for the lived experiences of urban school principals and the challenges that they face as they work to create schools of equity is a major focus of this study. As such, one cannot ignore the immense challenges that still exist within the public school experience for African American students. Feelings of isolation and marginalization are still prevalent and clearly observed in today's urban schools and these practices continue to oppress the needs and desires of African American students. All of these issues serve to create challenges for school leaders as well. The findings of this study suggest that urban school principals encountered schools staffs that were not prepared to talk about issues of race and targeted support of African American students. As such, several study participants have engaged in courageous leadership actions that challenge the marginalizing practices that exist in public education. In opposition to the subjection imposed in education, critical race theory has evolved throughout the education literature.



The work of Solozano and Yosso (2001) helps to explain the role of critical race theory and its impact in schools. The long tradition of racism and oppression against African Americans is still present today and although it is completely permissible to provide overt support and attention to African American students, several study participants feel that they cannot remove the “invisible handcuffs” they wear and do what is necessary to support African American students. While this continues to be a pressing concern and must be addressed, it is promising to note that a number of study participants are actively engaged in courageously tackling the subject of race and meeting the needs of African American students. Participant 9 in particular has developed a conceptual model of how she intentionally designs the structures of her school to meet the needs of her African American students. These overt actions by Participant 9 are the bold steps necessary to create an effective urban school.

Based on the themes that have emerged from this study, it is clear that courageous leaders are needed to make the necessary changes within schools to create systems and structures that will meet the diverse needs of African American students. The African American achievement gap has been well documented for more than forty years and although there continues to be support for other sensitive populations, the African American student still struggles. The time has come to shift the mindset of educational leaders and empower them to meet the needs of African American students by pursuing the goal of closing the excellence gap. The time has come to pursue bigger and better things for African

American students. It is time to set the bar at excellence (Perry et al., 2003) and the time for courageous leaders to step to the forefront and accept the challenge. The voices, experiences, and perspectives of Inland Empire urban school principals speak to the gravity of this challenge. Additionally, a call to action is needed to empower leaders to remove the “invisible handcuffs” and ensure an equitable education for all students.

### Limitations

This study was limited to the examination of one Inland Empire urban school district. It was further limited to the examination of elementary and middle school principals actively working to close the achievement gap for African American students. The absence of high school principals in the study limited the breadth of experiences offered from participants. Further limitations resulted from the use of only semi-structured interview data. Although a data triangulation protocol was utilized, the addition of archival performance data, classroom instruction observations, staff meeting observations, and follow up interviews would strengthen the findings of the study.

### Implications

This study can provide critical information to schools and school districts as they examine ways to create equitable schools for students. Implications for this type of research are numerous considering the multitude of challenges with

the African American achievement gap and leadership needs of public schools. In addition, as research, practice, and policy are considered, districts in search of principal leaders with the disposition, mindsets, and grit needed to be successful in an urban environment should consider the following implications as potential best practice.

University researchers should focus their attention on understanding the persistence of the underlying causes of marginalization of African American students. These practices continue to impact the education and schooling experiences of African American students. Additionally, education scholars should explore how to more effectively infuse issues of equity and diversity into teacher preparation as well as administrative development programs. A strong push to embed more diversity curriculum and classes into the preparation of education leaders is essential in building up leaders' capacity to tackle the challenges of dealing with race and inequities related to race. Findings from this study show that culturally sensitive leaders are vitally important to the success of African American students.

School and district leaders have the opportunity to view the findings of this study and develop responsive systems of support for African American students. The development of a stand-alone department focused on the achievement and advancement of African American students would be beneficial to increasing the amount of professional development education practitioners receive. The office would provide professional development in the areas of African American

studies, culturally relevant pedagogy, and equity and diversity training. Additionally, the office would provide comprehensive services and support to leaders engaging in courageous leadership practices. These services would include: developing critical conversation skills, trusting relationships, and strong leadership practices. This will increase the awareness and sensitivity of employees and leaders around the challenges African American students are facing. By increasing the capacity and skills of teachers and staff to meet the needs of African American students, it will be possible to increase the key performance indicators of literacy, graduation, and college attainment.

A strong commitment from district leadership will give school principals the green light to be more aggressive with the support structures provided for African American students. If I were Superintendent, I would develop and recommend to the board of education that three key initiatives be adopted in an effort to assist principals in removing their “invisible handcuffs” when targeting African American student achievement. First, the district would pursue grants funding opportunities to create unique programs and services. Second, the district would mandate a cultural immersion program focused on African American studies and culture for all school leaders. Third, the district would create a rigorous on boarding program that would include immersion into the local community to see the reality of the challenges African Americans face in the Inland Empire.

The use of grants will provide comprehensive wrap-around services to African American students and their families. The wrap-around services would be

in the form of parent education programs such as PIQUE or the *Black Lemonade Project*. These additional supports create the opportunity for the principal and school to develop relationships and demonstrate a caring environment for students and their parents. The stronger the relationship the principal develops with students and their families the more responsible they will feel to do what is necessary to support African American students. Furthermore, as school leaders actively engage the parents and family of African American students, a stronger relationship between the school and family will develop. This strong relationship will serve to support the needs and success of African American students.

A cultural immersion program for school leaders to learn, explore, and embrace African American history would build the leader's capacity to connect with their students and community. The program components would include cultural sensitivity training, and experiential learning of African American history. One foundational activity of the program would be tours of the neighborhoods as well as home visits to the students in an effort to build relationships with students and their families.

Lastly, a strong orientation and onboarding program for all new site administrators. This would include indoctrinating the new leaders into the reality of urban schools and the urban communities surrounding them. Additionally, the new leaders would be involved in a coaching and mentoring relationship with a high performing leader already embedded in the district. By creating strong systems of support for the new leader along with a clear understanding of the

needs of the students and community, we can create the conditions for new equity-minded principals to develop and effectively serve the needs of students.

A major shift in policy is called for by local policy makers and well as state education officials regarding the support of African American students. There should be protected dollars allocated to every identified African American student in California public schools. This action would mirror the support offered to other high-risk population such as, foster youth, English learners, and low socioeconomic status students. The reality is that there is more than 40 years of research documenting the African American achievement gap yet no action has been taken by the Federal or State government to address the issue. This non-action helps to perpetuate the continued marginalization of African American students in public education. Local school board can take actions to begin to address the problem by intentionally directing district Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) dollars to initiatives to support the needs of African American students.

### Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study present important information and knowledge in understanding the experiences and challenges of urban school principals as they address issues surrounding the African American achievement gap. Based on the data collected and analyzed during the study, recommendations were made for schools and school districts to consider when developing equitable schools

and school principals to lead them. Nevertheless, this study has future implications for researchers and practitioners. Suggestions for future research include:

1. Take a larger sample of urban school principals from various Inland Empire school districts and replicate the current study. This proposed study would strengthen the findings of this initial study.
2. Develop alternate criteria and include the voices of high schools principals while replicating the current study. Due to the absence of the high school principal voice within the current study, it would be beneficial to redesign the criteria utilized to determine principal participant selection.
3. Conduct a follow up study with current study participants including follow up interviews and attempt to develop deeper understanding of the reluctance to developing programs and services specific to the needs of African American students. This type of study would strengthen the general findings of the researcher and add significant value to the current education leadership literature on effective leadership practices and African American students.
4. Conduct an alternate study to discern if the same leadership challenges and obstacles exist when developing intervention and support systems for other identified subgroups working to close the achievement gap.

## Final Reflection

In order to change the academic achievement of African American students, it will be incumbent upon leadership to take the courageous and necessary action to address the challenges of race and racism in our public schools. In order to empower leaders to accept this responsibility it will be imperative to educate policy makers and high ranking district officials of the need to overtly plan and restructure urban schools to respond and support African American students.

Urban principal leaders must accept the challenge of leading communities of poverty and invest in people that believe in children and the dream of a quality education for our students. When schools are built on the foundations of relationships, care, and equity for everyone, the dream of a quality education will be a reality for all students.



APPENDIX A  
DISTRICT APPROVAL TO CONDUCT RESEARCH



Dale Marsden, Ed.D.  
Superintendent

Matty Zamora, Ed.D., Assistant Superintendent

May 12, 2014

San Bernardino City USD  
Assessment, Accountability, & Educational Technology  
793 North E Street  
San Bernardino, CA 92410  
(909) 386-2557  
[barbara.richardson@sbcusd.k12.ca.us](mailto:barbara.richardson@sbcusd.k12.ca.us)

Gordon Amerson  
7245 Gabriel Drive  
Fontana, CA 92336  
(909) 728-3237  
[001693002@coyote.csusb.edu](mailto:001693002@coyote.csusb.edu)

Dear Mr. Amerson:

The attached form is in response to the requested information received by Assessment, Accountability, & Educational Technology on May 8, 2014. Seven of the eight criteria have been met. Pending receipt of a letter of approval from your University's Internal Review Board, SBCUSD provides conditional approval for conducting research and request for data.

Please contact Barbara Richardson two weeks prior to the date you need the requested data. We require adequate advance notice in order to dedicate the needed resources for your request.

If you have any questions or concerns you may contact the Assessment, Accountability, & Educational Technology Department at (909) 386-2557.

Sincerely,

APPENDIX B  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



Academic Affairs  
Office of Academic Research • Institutional Review Board

June 04, 2014

Mr. Gordon Amerson and Prof. Louie Rodriguez  
c/o: Prof. Louie Rodriguez  
Department of Leadership and Curriculum  
California State University, San Bernardino  
5500 University Parkway  
San Bernardino, California 92407

**CSUSB**  
**INSTITUTIONAL**  
**REVIEW BOARD**  
Expedited Review  
IRB# 13080  
Status  
**APPROVED**

Dear Mr. Amerson and Prof. Rodriguez:

Your application to use human subjects, titled "Narrowing the Gap: Exploring the Characteristics and Practices of Urban School Principals Closing the Achievement Gap" has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The attached informed consent document has been stamped and signed by the IRB chairperson. All subsequent copies used must be this officially approved version. A change in your informed consent (no matter how minor the change) requires resubmission of your protocol as amended. Your application is approved for one year from June 04, 2014 through June 03, 2015. One month prior to the approval end date you need to file for a renewal if you have not completed your research. See additional requirements (Items 1 – 4) of your approval below.

Your responsibilities as the researcher/investigator reporting to the IRB Committee include the following 4 requirements as mandated by the Code of Federal Regulations 45 CFR 46 listed below. Please note that the protocol change form and renewal form are located on the IRB website under the forms menu. Failure to notify the IRB of the above may result in disciplinary action. You are required to keep copies of the informed consent forms and data for at least three years. Please notify the IRB Research Compliance Officer for any of the following:

- 1) Submit a protocol change form if any changes (no matter how minor) are proposed in your research protocol for review and approval of the IRB before implemented in your research,
- 2) If any unanticipated/adverse events are experienced by subjects during your research,
- 3) To apply for renewal and continuing review of your protocol one month prior to the protocols end date,
- 4) When your project has ended by emailing the IRB Research Compliance Officer.

The CSUSB IRB has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk to the human participants and the aspects of the proposal related to potential risk and benefit. This approval notice does not replace any departmental or additional approvals which may be required.

If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact Michael Gillespie, the IRB Compliance Officer. Mr. Michael Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email at [mgillespie@csusb.edu](mailto:mgillespie@csusb.edu). Please include your application approval identification number (listed at the top) in all correspondence.

Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,

*Sharon Ward, Ph.D.*  
Sharon Ward, Ph.D., Chair  
Institutional Review Board

SW/mg

cc: Prof. Louie Rodriguez, Department of Leadership and Curriculum

909.537.7588 • fax: 909.537.7028 • <http://irb.csusb.edu/>  
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APPENDIX C  
PRINCIPAL RECRUITMENT LETTER



**"SEEKING PRINCIPALS"**

TO: SBCUSD Principals

FROM: Gordon D. Amerson, Principal, Arroyo Valley HS & CSUSB Doctoral Student

DATE: 6/15/2014

SUBJECT: Principal Leadership Research Study – Recruitment Letter

I am researching principal leadership in San Bernardino City Unified School District that has shown progress in narrowing the achievement gap for African American students as part of my doctoral dissertation at California State University, San Bernardino.

The purposes of this study are to examine the leadership principles and institutional practices of school site principals in the San Bernardino City Unified School District that are working to narrow the achievement gap for African American students as to: (a) why the achievement gap continues to occur in urban areas throughout the United States; (b) what successful leadership strategies do they credit for narrowing the achievement gap of African American students at their respective schools; (c) how do they as leaders internalize their role and answer the "call to action" to curb the achievement gap for African American students at their respective schools.

Your participation in the study will contribute to knowledge and leadership practices that work to narrow the African American student achievement gap.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in a 45-60 minute personal interview regarding your leadership practices and your school institutional practices that contribute to achievement growth of African American students.

The interview will take place in person at your convenience. I will audiotape record the interviews and transcribe the notes verbatim to ensure accuracy. Participant's identities will remain confidential and the interview notes and recordings will not be shared with others. The interview notes will be examined for common themes and used to identify principals' leadership practices that contribute to narrowing the achievement gap. Participants will be given the opportunity to opt out of the recorded interview.

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate you are free to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time. A copy of the informed consent and interview protocol are attached for your information.

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CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN BERNARDINO  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD COMMITTEE  
APPROVED 06/04/14 VOID AFTER 06/03/15  
IRB# 13080 CHAIR *Amerson, Ph.D.*



I will contact you in the next week to answer any questions you may have and schedule an interview time.

You will be asked to return one copy of the signed consent form prior to the in-person interview to:

Gordon D. Amerson  
7245 Gabriel Drive  
Fontana, California 92336

You may also contact me at (909) 728-3237 and I can arrange a time to pick up the signed approval. If you have any questions regarding this study please feel free to contact me [001693002@coyote.csusb.edu](mailto:001693002@coyote.csusb.edu). If you have any additional questions or concerns regarding this study, you may also contact my research supervisor Dr. Louie Rodriguez at [lrodrig@csusb.edu](mailto:lrodrig@csusb.edu).

Respectfully,

\_\_\_\_\_  
Gordon D. Amerson

Attachments:

Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities;  
Principal Interview Protocol and Questions

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN BERNARDINO  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD COMMITTEE  
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IRB # 13080 CHAIR *Sharon Wood, Ph.D.*

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APPENDIX D  
INFORMED CONSENT



Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Principal Investigator: Gordon D. Amerson

Title of Project: Narrowing the Gap: Exploring the Characteristics and Practices of Urban School Principals Closing the Achievement Gap

1. I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the dissertation research study conducted by doctoral student Gordon D. Amerson, from the Educational Leadership Program at California State University, San Bernardino. I understand that I may contact Mr. Amerson's dissertation chairperson Dr. Louie Rodriguez at [louiefrodriguez@gmail.com](mailto:louiefrodriguez@gmail.com) if I have any questions or concerns regarding the study.
2. The purposes of this study are to examine the leadership principles and institutional practices of school site principals in the San Bernardino City Unified School District that are working to narrow the achievement gap for African American students as to: (a) why the achievement gap continues to occur in urban areas throughout the United States; (b) what successful leadership strategies do they credit for narrowing the achievement gap of African American students at their respective schools; (c) how do they as leaders internalize their role and answer the "call to action" to curb the achievement gap for African American students at their respective schools.
3. I understand that my participation will involve one 45-60 minute interview regarding leadership practices that are employed to narrow the achievement gap of African American students.
4. My participation in the study will be from the date listed above to October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2014. The interview will be conducted in person and tape recorded in order to ensure the accuracy of the interview notes. The researcher will convert the audio files to written text and will use the interview content to identify principal leadership practices that contribute to narrowing the achievement gap for African American students.
5. I understand that the possible benefits to myself and/or society from the research are increased knowledge about leadership behaviors and practices that have contributed to increased academic performance of African American students. I understand that I may not benefit at all from my participation.
6. I understand that the researcher will work with me to ensure there is minimal risk, discomfort, and inconvenience, identifying and addressing any concerns I may have, I understand that harm to human subjects is not limited to physical injury, and that there are certain risks and discomforts that might

be associated with research. I believe the risks of this study are minimized and are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits of the study. I understand that I have the right to refuse to answer any question, and to discontinue participation at any time.

7. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may refuse to participate and or withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in the project at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I also understand that the researcher may find it necessary to end my participation in this study.
8. I understand that the investigator will take all reasonable measures to protect the confidentiality of my records and my identity will not be revealed in any publication that may result from this project. The confidentiality of my records will be maintained in accordance with applicable state and federal law.
9. If the findings of the study are published or presented to a professional audience, no personally identifying information will be released. I understand that the interviews will be tape recorded only with my permission prior to each interview. The raw data gathered will be stored on the researcher's personal computer and transcribed interviews will be stored in locked file cabinets to which only the investigator will have access. The possibility exists that the data may be used in future research. If this is the case, the data will be used without any personally identifying information so that I cannot be identified, and the use of the data will be supervised by the investigator listed above. The raw data will be maintained in a secure manner for three years at which time the raw data will be destroyed. I do not anticipate the need to share un-coded data with others, and would do so only with your permission.
10. I understand that the investigator is willing to answer any inquiries I may have concerning the research herein described. I understand that I may contact Gordon D. Amerson at (909) 728-3237 or [001693002@coyote.csusb.edu](mailto:001693002@coyote.csusb.edu), if I have other questions or concerns about this research. If I have questions about my rights as a research participant, I understand that I can contact Dr. Louie Rodriguez, California State University, San Bernardino Department of Educational Leadership, 5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino CA, 92407. If I have questions about my rights as a research participant, I may also contact Dr. Sharon Ward, chairperson of the CSUSB Institutional Review Board at [sward.csusb.edu](mailto:sward.csusb.edu).
11. I will be informed of any significant new findings developed during the course of my participation in this research, which may have a bearing on my willingness to continue in the study.

12. I understand I will not receive any compensation, financial or otherwise, for participating in this study.
13. I understand to my satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have received a copy of this informed consent form, which I have read and understand.

I hereby consent to participate in the research described above.

---

Participant's Signature

---

Date

---

Witness

---

Date

I have explained and defined in detail the research procedure in which the subject has consented to participate. Having explained this and answered any questions, I am cosigning this form and accepting this person's consent.

---

Principal Investigator

---

Date

APPENDIX E  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL



## Principal Interview Protocol and Questions

I will review the following information prior to our interview

You have been chosen for this study because your school has met specific criteria related to the narrowing the achievement gap for African American students.

I will be conducting research regarding your leadership practices that may contribute to increased success of African American students in a large urban school district.

I will be conducting one 45-60 minute interview with you. I will record notes of our conversation during the interview and the interview will be tape recorded with your permission.

I will not be excessive in demands and will be sensitive to your needs. I will attempt to be the least disruptive as possible.

When the findings of the study are shared with the educational community, I assure your confidentiality that names will not be used in the manuscript, and individual identities will be disguised through coding of data. No one will have access to the transcriptions, recordings, and field notes except me.

Your participation is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with the research or your school or your district.

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty.

Original documents and recordings of interviews will be safeguarded and not shared with other. They will be stored for three years, after which they will be destroyed.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

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IRB# 13080 CHAIR *Angela A. Ph.D.*

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